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FAME AND FORTUNE

Stories OF BOYS WEEKLY. who make MONEY.

ON HIS MERITS;
OR, THE SMARTEST BOY ALIVE. *By A SELF-MADE MAN.*



The situation became desperate when Fernandez, backed by his associates, partially forced the door "Caramba!" cried the Mexican, "open or we kill you!" Jack and Bart tried to close the door, while Edna, with flashing eyes, stood ready to shoot.

Fame and Fortune Weekly

STORIES OF BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY

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ON HIS MERITS

OR,

THE SMARTEST BOY ALIVE

By A SELF-MADE MAN

CHAPTER I.

JACK MASON AND BART FOSTER.

"Hello, Bart," said Jack Mason, a good-looking, energetic lad of nineteen years who was chief clerk and cashier for the shipping firm of Fairchild & Garrison, in the city of Buffalo, to Bart Foster, junior clerk and messenger, "late again, eh? Lucky for you that Mr. Spencer hasn't arrived yet, or there'd probably be something doing. He said if you turned up late again he'd——"

"Fire me," grinned Bart.

"Exactly. It doesn't seem to worry you much."

"Yes, it would worry me a good deal to lose my job," replied Foster, soberly, as he hung up his hat; "but I couldn't get here any sooner."

"Why couldn't you?"

"There was a blockade on Blank Street. Our car, as well as a couple of dozen behind, was held up by a heavily loaded truck that broke down across the track."

"Well, that's a reasonable excuse, though I'm bound to say that Mr. Spencer might regard it with some suspicion."

"Oh, shoot Spencer!" exclaimed Bart, with a look of disgust. "He gives me a pain in the ribs. Ever since he was advanced from the position of manager to a silent partnership in the business, just before Mr. Fairchild was taken sick and had to go South to recuperate by the doctor's orders, you and me have been in hot water."

"That's no lie," answered Mason. "Mr. Spencer seems

to have contracted a standing grouch against me. Hardly anything I do seems to suit him. I believe he'd discharge me if he dared."

Well, I don't wonder much."

"What do you mean by that, Bart?" asked Jack, in some surprise.

"You know why Spencer is down on you, don't you?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"Then you're pretty blind."

"Blind?"

"Yes. Haven't you tumbled to the fact that Spencer is sore on you because you and Mr. Fairchild's niece, Edna Garrison, are so thick?"

"Why no, of course not," replied Jack, in a tone of astonishment. "What has Mr. Spencer to do with Miss Garrison?"

"A whole lot."

"In what way?"

"Why, he's in love with her. I should think any one could see that with half an eye."

"Mr. Spencer in love with Edna?"

"Sure thing. Dead gone."

"Why, she's hardly eighteen, while Mr. Spencer is old enough to be——"

"Her father, eh? That doesn't make any difference—with him. He's stuck on her as sure as you live. I thought you knew that."

"I never dreamed of such a thing."

"Well, you just watch him, if he's in, the next time she

comes here to see you, for that's what brings her down here."

"Oh, nonsense! She comes here to get her weekly allowance."

"Of course. I know that; but she manages to hang around your desk just the same, as if you were the only thing on earth that attracted her."

"Come off, Bart Foster," replied Jack, with a flushed face.

"No, I won't come off. It's the truth. Don't you s'pose I've got eyes? She's a corking pretty girl, all right—golden brown hair, a mouth like a rosebud, two eyes that sparkle like a pair of sapphires, a figure—"

"Bart, you're wasting your time. If Mr. Spencer should come in now and catch you he'd—"

"He'd do nothing. Ain't I busy looking over these invoices?" said Foster, with a chuckle, holding up a bundle of documents, "to see which ones I haven't copied yet into my book?"

"The end of my desk isn't the place for you to do that. You've got a desk of your own."

"Oh, all right. I'll go there if you don't want me here."

"I didn't say that I don't want you here. I'm glad of a chance to talk to you, but I don't want to see you get into trouble with the boss."

"The boss!" exclaimed Bart, with a sneer. "I don't recognize him as my boss. Mr. Fairchild is senior partner. He's a gentleman, while Spencer—oh, lor'! Here he comes now," and Foster flew to his desk and got very busy as Gideon Spencer came into the office, and after a sharp glance into the counting-room walked over to his private room.

Mr. Spencer looked over his mail and then rang for his stenographer, a pretty young lady named Mamie Dunn, who had a desk in a sunny corner of the counting-room, and who, to tell the exact truth, didn't like Gideon Spencer for a cent.

Neither did the three or four men employed in the warehouse adjoining the office like Mr. Spencer either, so it is easy to understand that he was by no means a popular personage in the establishment.

The only one who seemed to side in with the junior partner was his nephew, Morris Abbott, who occupied the post of warehouse clerk, and he was often seen in confidential conversation with Mr. Spencer.

Morris was a disagreeable, unhealthy-looking boy of about eighteen.

He hated both Jack and Bart, and disliked Mamie Dunn, because they both stood high in the esteem of Mr. Fairchild, the head of the house.

He was extremely anxious to get into the counting-room himself, and was constantly after his uncle on the subject.

Finally Mr. Spencer promised to give him Bart's place if he could find a reasonable excuse for discharging Foster.

As Morris made no secret of his hostility to the count-

ing-room employees it is quite natural to believe that he was not well liked in return.

Bart threatened to punch his head more than once, and Morris had dared him to do it, which would have brought on a scrap between them only for Jack, who persuaded Bart to hold off, as he was afraid Mr. Spencer would sustain his nephew and bounce Foster.

Morris played the spy on the office employees whenever he could, which was not near as often as he would have wished, because his duties kept him almost constantly in and around the warehouse.

However, he managed to learn that Bart came to work late that morning, and of course he intended to report the fact to his uncle at the first chance.

The firm did a very fair shipping trade on Lake Erie, between Buffalo, Cleveland and Toledo.

The house had been long established under the name of Fairchild & Garrison, and bore a good reputation.

Mr. Garrison, now dead two years, had married Mr. Fairchild's sister, and was the father of Edna Garrison, who was quite an heiress in her way.

Soon after Mr. Garrison's death the surviving and senior partner employed Mr. Gideon Spencer as a kind of general manager in the business.

Spencer was a shrewd and clever man, and played his cards so well that Mr. Fairchild soon began to regard him as a valuable addition to the house.

At the expiration of his first year of service he intimated to Mr. Fairchild that he was considering an offer from a Chicago firm that carried with it the promise of an ultimate interest in the business.

Mr. Fairchild, not wishing to part with him, offered him a quarter interest in the shipping business on favorable terms.

As this was just what Mr. Spencer was after, he closed with the proposition, and his name was thereafter printed in small letters in one corner, while Mr. Fairchild's appeared in the other, just above the name of the old firm, which was not changed, on all the stationery used by the house.

Although he held but a quarter interest, the balance being evenly divided between Mr. Fairchild and his niece, Edna Garrison, Spencer's object was to ultimately succeed to the entire business.

He decided that the easiest and quickest way to this end was to pay court to Miss Edna and marry her if he could.

If successful in this he would control five-eighths of the business, and he did not doubt but he could secure the balance through a bit of sharp practice after the senior partner, who was sixty-five, had paid the debt of nature.

About the time that Spencer was admitted to the firm Mr. Fairchild was taken seriously ill and had to go to Florida with his wife.

This left the new junior partner in control of the business, and the very first thing he did was to get rid of the young warehouse clerk and put his nephew, Morris Abbott, in the place.

CHAPTER II.

MR. SPENCER'S VISITOR.

Mamie Dunn was closeted quite a while with Mr. Spencer, for he had quite a good many letters to dictate that morning.

While she was thus engaged Jack and Bart worked away industriously at their desks; the silence being alone broken by the occasional entrance of some caller who had business to transact with Mason.

Finally Mamie came out and went to her desk, and soon her typewriter was clicking merrily away.

After a while Mr. Spencer came into the counting-room, gave Jack some instructions, and then he went into the warehouse.

In half an hour he returned and called Bart into his private office.

The boy emerged in a few minutes with a red face and perturbed manner.

"What do you think?" he said, going up to Jack's desk.

"That little sneak, Morris Abbott, saw me when I arrived this morning, and he has told Spencer that I came half an hour late."

"The dickens he did," replied Mason, with a look of sympathy. "What did Mr. Spencer say to you?"

"He was going to fire me right off the reel, and I had all I could do to square myself. I ain't sure yet how it will turn out."

"It's a shame," said Jack.

"It's an outrage. I've half a mind to go right into the warehouse and knock the suspenders off Abbott."

"Don't you do it," interposed Jack, hastily. "That would ruin all your chances of holding on to your job. It's my opinion that Abbott wants your place, and is doing all he can to queer you."

"Yes, I'm sure that's his game. It's too bad that Mr. Fairchild is away. But if that little rascal does get me fired I'll break every bone in his body."

Bart walked over to tell the story of his grievance to Mamie, whom he was sweet on, and who he knew would sympathize with him.

At that moment a swarthy-looking man, with earrings in his ears, entered the room.

That he was a Mexican Jack saw at a glance.

He walked up to the little opening in the brass partition, favored Mason with an impudent kind of leer, and then asked if Gideon Spencer was in.

"Yes, he's in," replied Jack, wondering what business this fellow could have with the junior partner.

"Ha! Very good. I want to see him."

"What's your name and your business?"

The Mexican's eyes glittered and a sarcastic smile revealed two even rows of white teeth.

"My name—ha! It is Manuel Fernandez. My business—that I shall myself explain to him."

"Bart," called out Jack. "Tell Mr. Spencer there is a man here who wants to see him on business. His name is Manuel Fernandez."

Bart broke away from Mamie and started on his mission, but the Mexican, perceiving the door for which he was bound, intercepted him.

"I will not trouble the young senor to announce me. I walk in myself."

"Hold on," objected Bart. "You can't do that. I've got to tell Mr. Spencer first."

"Caramba!" exclaimed the Mexican, fiercely, seizing Bart by the arm and whirling him around. "Take yourself out of the way or I do to you what you shall not like."

Bart was paralyzed, and before he could interfere further Fernandez strode into the private office unannounced.

Mr. Spencer was seated at his desk, busily rummaging the drawers and pigeonholes, and there was an anxious, worried look on his face.

"Where could I have misplaced those papers?" he asked himself, resting his elbow on the desk and supporting his forehead with his index finger. "If they were to get into anybody's hands who understand their significance, I'd be ruined. It is evident that they're not in my desk, as I supposed they were. I must have taken them home, though I do not recollect having done so. Bah! What a fool I am to excite myself with vague fears! I'll take a glass of whisky. That will pull me together."

He pulled out one of the lower drawers, from which he produced a bottle and a glass, and filling the latter half full of the amber-colored liquor drank it down and replaced the articles.

At that moment Manuel Fernandez pushed his way into the room.

Mr. Spencer turned around at the sound and his face changed color as he noticed who his visitor was.

"Well, Fernandez, what brings you here?" he asked gruffly. "And how came you to walk in unannounced?"

The Mexican showed his teeth in one of his unpleasant smiles, coolly walked to a chair alongside of the desk, threw one leg carelessly over the other, and producing from a pocket a small oblong piece of rice-paper and some tobacco began to roll a cigarette into form.

Whether Mr. Spencer was astonished at his visitor's nerve, or moved by some other feeling, he never uttered a word while Fernandez proceeded with the utmost deliberation to make and light his cigarette.

"What shall bring me here, Senor Spencer?" observed the Mexican, after blowing several rings of smoke from his lips. "What you suppose?—money."

"Money!" exclaimed the junior partner.

"Si, senor," and the Mexican smiled again.

"I am not aware that I owe you anything, Fernandez," replied Spencer coldly.

"It is a short memory you have, senor. It is not so long ago—six, seven month, perhaps—that you did arrange with me to sail the schooner Neptune—"

"You needn't go any further. I did make an arrange-

ment with you to sail the Neptune from the port of Buffalo to the port of Toledo. The vessel was lost somewhere in mid-lake. Well, you were liberally paid for your part in the transaction, were you not?"

"That is as it may be," replied Fernandez, blowing out more rings of smoke. "I was what you call it strapped at the time and did not make so good a bargain as I could have wished. I held myself too cheap considering the—ha!—risk."

"Well, I am not responsible for that. I named the price I would pay. You accepted. It was a business transaction between us."

"Si. It was a business transaction, as you call it, but not one such as shall bear the light. The Neptune was a rotten craft; you loaded her with a worthless cargo; you did insure both at, shall we say, twenty times its value; then you fixed matters with me to wreck her somewhere between this place and Toledo. Is it not so? Was it not all arranged that you might swindle the insurance companies?"

"For heaven's sake, not so loud, Fernandez!" exclaimed Mr. Spencer, in a panic. "Why have you come here to rake that matter up? It is over and I hope—forgotten."

"I have a good memory and do not so easily forget, señor. After I reported the loss of the schooner I had to go before what you call the Board of Underwriters and make under oath a statement. I do not remember that I was paid for so doing."

"It was part of our arrangement, and a duty you could not very well escape without bringing suspicion on yourself."

"I understand, señor," replied the Mexican, preparing and lighting a fresh cigarette. "You got your money, eh?"

"That is a matter that need not concern you," replied Spencer, sourly.

"But it does concern me, señor. I have called to make what you call the touch. Understand? I want the mazuma."

"It is not my custom to pay twice for the same service," replied Spencer.

"No? Perhaps in this case you will make an exception."

"Why should I?"

"Because I want the money."

"I do not admit that fact as a sufficient reason."

"Then suppose, señor, that a hint, shall I say, of the truth should reach the ears of the Board of Underwriters? What then?"

"Would you betray my confidence, you ras—?"

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders and smiled shrewdly.

"Look here, Fernandez, you do not seem to understand that if you turned upon me you would only be putting your own neck into a noose."

"And yours, too, eh, señor?" grinned the visitor. "You have much to lose, I think. I have—nothing. It is not the first time I have been in what you call the jug. It is not impossible that I could an arrangement make to turn the evidence of the State. Then where you would find yourself? In la sopa."

Mr. Spencer wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"I understand your purpose. You came here to bleed me. To levy blackmail."

"Call it what you will, señor," replied the Mexican carelessly. "It is necessary that I have the price to live. There is no one to whom I can make the touch but you. What say you, señor?"

"How much do you want?" asked the junior partner, desperately.

"How much? Ha! Now you are talking. I see we shall come together. Suppose I say one thousand dollars? It is not too much, eh?"

"A thousand furies!" cried Spencer, angrily. "I'll give you one hundred."

"It shall not be enough, señor. It would be what you call a flea-bite. I want what shall let me spread myself. You understand?"

Mr. Spencer understood, but did not take kindly to the suggestion.

"I will raise the ante to—"

At that moment there came a knock on the door.

CHAPTER III.

THE BEGINNING OF THE PLOT.

"Come in," said Mr. Spencer.

Jack Mason entered with a filled-in printed form in his hand.

"Will you please put your signature to this, sir?" asked the young cashier.

The junior partner took the paper, glanced over it, and then signing it without a word handed it back to Mason, who immediately retired.

The brief appearance of Jack Mason in the room seemed to have made a change in Mr. Spencer's thoughts.

"Did you take note of that boy, Fernandez?" he asked the Mexican.

"Si, señor. He is a smart boy, is he not? What you call a comer."

"He's a viper!" almost hissed the junior partner.

"A viper!" exclaimed the Mexican, looking surprised.

"Yes, a viper. Do you know what that is?"

"I do not quite understand, señor," said Fernandez, rolling his third cigarette. "A viper, as I know it, is some kind of a reptile—a snake. In what way shall this boy resemble—?"

"Suppose a viper crossed your path, Fernandez, what should you do?" said Spencer in a tense tone.

"I'd crush it with my foot," replied the Mexican calmly.

"Of course you would. Well, that boy who just came in here is as hateful and dangerous to me as the reptile I have named."

Fernandez seemed to comprehend his meaning, for a peculiar smile crossed his features as he struck a match and lit the cigarette.

"I am going to remove him from my path at once. I may perhaps require your services in this matter if a little

scheme I have hatched up fails me. Can I depend on you?"

"Si, señor, if you will pay me well."

"I will make it worth your while, depend on it; but I hope it may not be necessary to call on you."

"As you please, señor. But this thousand I asked for? You will hand it over?"

"I will give you \$500 now. If I have to use you in connection with this boy I will call on you and talk business. Where can I find you?"

Fernandez mentioned an address where he could be found and Mr. Spencer noted it down.

"When shall I hear from you, señor?"

"To-morrow, or next day, perhaps."

"I will take the five hundred," said the Mexican, slowly, "on account."

The junior partner made no remark, but leaving his seat went into the counting-room and asked Jack for \$500 in bills.

He returned with the money and handed it to his visitor.

"Do not come here any more," he said. "It might cause suspicion. I will call on you if I find it necessary."

"If you do not come I shall want the other five hundred —remember."

Thus speaking the Mexican got up, nodded to the shipper and then left the office and the building.

"Now to put my little scheme into execution that I hope will end in the utter ruin of the old man's favorite—Jack Mason," said the junior partner to himself. He has presumed to turn his eyes on Fairchild's niece, and she, dazzled, no doubt, by his good looks, youth and prospects, receives his attentions with favor, while she turns a cold shoulder on me. But I am not to be thwarted. She holds the balance of power in this business, and through her I mean to succeed to the entire management. Fairchild is an old man. His health is broken and he cannot long survive. It is up to me to make the best use of my opportunities. With the old man out of the way in Florida, I ought to be able to shape matters so that in the end success will be mine. He that has the brain to contrive and the will to execute should be able to overcome every obstacle that lies in his path. Therefore I fancy I shall not fail. I think I can depend on my nephew, Morris. He hates both of those boys—especially Foster, whom he seeks to displace. He ought to be an easy tool. I will send for him now. He shall bait the trap."

Mr. Spencer touched a bell on his desk and Bart responded.

"Tell Morris that I want to see him in my office."

"Yes, sir," replied Foster.

He paused for a moment beside Jack's desk.

"The boss has sent me for Morris," he said, with an anxious expression on his face. "Do you s'pose it has anything to do with me?"

"Oh, I guess not," replied Jack. "Don't cross a bridge before you come to it, Bart."

"Well, Spencer has got it in for me, anyway, and as

Morris wants my job, and is the new partner's nephew, things look kind of blue to me."

"Don't worry, old man. If the worst comes to the worst I'll tell Miss Garrison how you're placed and ask her to write to her uncle in your behalf. You stand well with Mr. Fairchild, and he won't let you be discharged, at least not without good cause, and I know there's no reason why you should be put out."

"Thank you, Jack," replied Bart, gratefully. "You're a good fellow, and I sha'n't forget it."

"That's all right. Now run along."

Bart then went into the warehouse and told Morris Abbott that his uncle wanted to see him in his private office.

Morris received the summons with a grin of satisfaction, and bestowing a triumphant look of malice on Foster he started for the office.

Bart shook his fist after him.

"I'd like to take some of the conceit out of you, you vindictive little reptile," he muttered. "You're a snake in the grass, that's what you are."

Morris entered the private office and took the chair lately vacated by Manual Fernandez.

"You sent for me, Uncle Gideon."

"I did. I want you to go down to the wharf of the Buffalo, Cleveland & Toledo Steamship Line and buy a through ticket for Toledo. Here is the money to pay for it."

Abbott's face showed his disappointment.

He thought his uncle had called him in to tell him that he had decided to discharge Bart Foster at the end of the week, and he was to take Bart's desk.

"Don't lose any time in getting the ticket, and bring it right in here. I have something to say to you."

Abbott's face cleared.

That was more encouraging.

He decided to hustle so as to get back as soon as he could.

"Bring a time-table back with you, and remember, don't show the ticket nor open your mouth on the subject to anybody. Understand?"

"All right, uncle," replied Morris.

He returned to his place in the warehouse for his hat and then started for the offices of the steamboat company.

The twelve-o'clock whistle was blowing when he got back and reported to Mr. Spencer in his office, laying the steamboat ticket on his desk.

"Now, Morris, I've got something to say to you," said his uncle, regarding the boy with fixed attention. "You don't like Bart Foster, do you?"

"I hate him," replied Morris, venomously.

"You want his place, don't you?"

"You bet your life I do," answered the boy, eagerly, while his eyes sparkled with anticipation.

"I suppose you would be willing to do me a favor if I agreed to give you Foster's place?"

"Sure I would," responded Morris, looking at his uncle in some surprise.

"You haven't any special liking for Mason, either, have you?"

"Not much," replied Morris, promptly. "I hate him, too. He sticks up for Foster right along. They're as good as chums. I wish they were both out of here."

"So do I," answered the uncle. "Especially Mason."

"Do you?" exclaimed Morris, wondering what was coming.

"Yes. Mason is a thorn in my side."

"Is he? Then why don't you fire him? You're the boss."

"Unfortunately he is a prime favorite with Mr. Fairchild. I am obliged to admit that he is an uncommonly smart boy. He attends to business right up to the mark. He's made his way up in this house from errand boy to cashier and head bookkeeper entirely on his merits. The old man is ready to swear by him. He's said so to me several times. Now the only way I can get him out is to bring some serious charge against him and—prove it."

"How are you going to do it?"

"I have a scheme, and I want you to help me carry it out. Will you? It will be greatly to your interest."

"Sure I will."

"I hope to come into complete control of this business one day, and then there will be nothing to prevent you from working yourself up to the post that Mason now holds. You will have me at your back."

This was a glittering bait, and Morris snapped at it eagerly.

Privately Mr. Spencer had no intention of ever advancing his nephew to the cashiership.

He was fully aware that his nephew had not the capacity to ever make good in any position better than that of an ordinary clerk.

Besides he knew that Morris could not be trusted with the charge of any considerable sum of money.

But he was willing to promise, or at least intimate, anything that would secure his nephew's present co-operation—the future could take care of itself.

"What is it you want me to do?" asked Morris, curiously.

"You know where the boys hang their coats, don't you, near the washroom?"

"Yes," nodded Abbott.

"Take this ticket and slip it into one of the inside pockets of Mason's coat. Take care no one sees you."

"I'll do it," grinned Morris, taking the steamboat ticket he had purchased. "Going to charge him with stealing it?"

"No. I've a better scheme than that. Tell Mason, as you go out, that I want to see him."

"All right."

"Wait a moment. I'll make your job easy for you. Send Miss Dunn in also, and tell Foster to run up to the stationer's and get me a quire of foolscap. That will leave the counting-room empty long enough for you to do the trick."

Morris chuckled gleefully and went outside.

Presently both Jack and the stenographer entered the private office.

Bart also departed on his mission.

"I wonder what Uncle Gid's scheme is?" Morris asked himself as he made his way to the place where Jack's coat now hung alone against the wall. "I'm dead glad he intends to get Mason out of the way. I never liked him for a cent. He's too stuck up to suit me, and he takes Foster's part all the time. I'll have things my own way when they are gone, and I won't have to work so hard and will get more money. I'd like to see Mason hauled up on the charge of stealing this ticket," he continued as he deliberately dropped it into Jack's pocket. "He'd get a year in jail for it at least, and that would give me lots of satisfaction. What's this he's got in his pocket? Blamed if it ain't Miss Garrison's picture. Where did he get it? I don't believe that she—"

"Has Mr. Mason gone to lunch?" asked a sweet voice almost behind him at that moment.

Morris jumped nearly a foot with consternation, and as he turned hastily around he jammed the photograph into his pocket.

CHAPTER IV.

JACK MASON AND EDNA GARRISON.

His eyes rested on a vision of loveliness attired in a gown of navy-blue cloth.

A jaunty little hat was perched becomingly on the top of her golden brown head, and she carried a blue silk parasol in her hand.

"M—Miss Garrison!" gasped Abbott, with a face as red as a boiled lobster.

"Yes. Why, what's the matter? You look frightened."

"N—no, I—I ain't frightened. I was just lookin' for somethin', that's all," he replied.

"Well, you didn't answer my question. Has Mr. Mason gone to lunch?"

"No miss. He's in with my uncle."

"Very well. I'll sit down and wait. Where is Miss Dunn?"

"She's in the private room, too. They'll be out in a minute. I'm in a hurry," and he made a break for the door of the warehouse, through which he disappeared like a shot.

"How funny that boy acted," mused Miss Edna Garrison. "One would almost fancy he was doing something he was ashamed of. He looked guilty, and, oh my! how he jumped when I first spoke to him. I wonder if that is Jack's coat? I am almost sure he took something out of one of the pockets and put it in his own. I must speak to Jack about this."

Evidently she was on unusually friendly terms with Mason to call him Jack.

At that moment Bart rushed in with the package of foolscap, and Jack and Mamie came out from the private room.

The girls smiled and shook hands, and Mamie went to her desk and prepared to go out to her lunch.

Bart, having delivered the paper to Mr. Spencer, put on his hat preparatory to accompanying the stenographer.

"This is a delightful surprise, Miss Edna," said Mason, going up to Miss Garrison and taking her by the hand.

"Is it?" she laughingly replied. "I like to give people delightful surprises."

"I am very glad to see you. Your presence here is like a sunbeam in a coal mine."

"How complimentary you are, Mr. Mason," she answered blushingly.

"You deserve all the compliments I could possibly pay you" replied Jack. "How pretty you look to-day."

"My goodness! Do you want to make me vain?" she asked with a rippling laugh.

"I don't think anything would make you vain Miss Edna. You are too sensible a girl," he answered.

"Thank you. I suppose I must accept that as another compliment."

"I hope you will accept it as the truth."

"Well, let us change the subject, please. I got a letter from my uncle this morning. He's on his way back to Buffalo."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Jack in a pleased voice. "Mr. Spencer said nothing to me about it."

"Mr. Spencer doesn't know anything about it."

"Doesn't he?" ejaculated the boy in some surprise.

"No. And you mustn't mention a word about it to him. I'm afraid there's something wrong."

"Something wrong?"

"Uncle didn't explain. He only told me to be sure and not tell anyone except you, and that you were to keep the news to yourself."

"I wonder what's in the wind?"

"Well, aunty wrote me also, and she said that uncle had received intelligence from a business friend in this city which reflects upon some business transaction in which Mr. Spencer was engaged before he became a partner in this house. It seems he bought a schooner called the Neptune to carry a load of dry goods and other merchandise he had bought on speculation to Toledo. The vessel and cargo were heavily insured, which was fortunate, as she was lost while making the trip. The money he got from the insurance companies he paid for his interest in this business. Now it appears that there is a suspicion that all was not right about the vessel and her cargo."

"You astonish me, Miss Edna," said Jack.

"Well, Jack—I mean, Mr. Mason," she corrected herself with a vivid blush. "I don't assert there was anything wrong, mind you; I only said that a suspicion exists in some quarter that the transaction was, shall I say irregular. At any rate uncle is coming back to investigate matters for he is jealous naturally lest the reputation of the firm of Fairchild & Garrison should suffer through any personal act of Mr. Spencer's."

"And how is Mr. Fairchild's health? He must be better to risk this trip north?"

"He is much better I am thankful to say. Indeed, aunt thinks that he is almost himself again."

"I am mighty glad to hear that, for, to say the truth, Miss Edna, neither Bart nor myself have been in a bed of roses since Mr. Fairchild went south. Mr. Spencer is not just the kind of boss that we can get along with."

"I don't wonder much. I don't like him myself. He makes me nervous. Why, he paid me a visit the other evening, and I was on pins and needles the whole evening. I really believe he was trying to make love to me."

"Make love to you!"

"Of course I must have been mistaken, but he was so pointed in his remarks, and he said many things that really embarrassed me. He said he would call again, though I gave him no encouragement, and he tried to force me to accept an invitation to the theater; but I told him that I never went to any place with a gentleman unless chaperoned by my aunt or some particular lady friend."

"I am glad you have mentioned that, Miss Edna," said Jack. "I was just about to ask you to go to the theater to-morrow evening with me. If you think you could honor me with your company I shall be glad to get a third ticket for any lady you would like to accompany you."

"Oh, it isn't necessary with you, Jack—I beg your pardon, Mr. Mason," blushing again. "I shall be glad to go with you alone. I shall feel perfectly safe with you. You are almost like one of the family."

"Thank you for saying that, Miss Edna. Also for calling me Jack. I wish you would always call me Jack."

"Do you?" she said softly, with a sly glance into his face.

"Yes. Mr. Mason doesn't sound familiar to me. Everybody calls me Jack—that is, everybody but you. Of course if you prefer not to, why—"

"Oh, I don't mind calling you Jack if you really wish me to, Mr.——"

"There you go again."

"Well, Jack, then," with a laugh and a blush.

"Thank you, Miss Edna," he said, seizing one of her hands and pressing it to his lips.

At that moment Mr. Spencer entered the counting-room and saw the action.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH TWO PERSONS ASK A MOMENTOUS QUESTION WITH DIFFERENT RESULTS.

The junior partner's eyes flashed ominously as he advanced toward the young people.

"Good afternoon, Miss Garrison," he said, forcing as pleasant a smile as possible upon his features.

Jack and Edna both turned a slightly startled look upon the acting head of the establishment, for his approach had been noiseless, and they had not dreamed of his presence on the scene.

"Don't let me interrupt you if your conversation is confidential," said Mr. Spencer, with a tinge of sarcasm in his

tones; "but when you are quite through, Mr. Mason, I should like you to take this check to the bank and cash it."

"I'll take it now, sir," replied Jack, moving away from the young lady.

Spencer held the check out to him, which he took.

"Probably I'll see you when I return, Miss Edna," said the boy, after changing his office jacket for his street one and pausing near her, hat in hand.

"I hope so," she answered with a smile. "I expect to remain a little while."

Jack bowed and left the office.

"Will you walk into my private office, Miss Garrison?" said Mr. Spencer, when they were alone, waving his hand toward his sanctum.

"Thank you, Mr. Spencer, but I can sit here just as well," she answered calmly.

"I would prefer to have you come into my room, as I have a few words to say to you," he said, in an oily tone.

She bowed and preceded him.

He motioned to the chair beside his desk.

"Miss Garrison, I am sure you will forgive me if I seize this opportunity to say a few words which—which——"

"I am listening, Mr. Spencer."

The junior partner looked at her in a way she didn't like.

"I have something of great importance to say to you," he went on, after a pause.

"To me!" she exclaimed in surprise.

"And why not? Is it singular that I should wish to speak with the one woman who is more to me than all else in the world?"

"Mr. Spencer!" ejaculated Edna, rising in her embarrassment.

"Don't go, Miss Garrison," said the junior partner, seizing her hand and detaining her. "Forgive me for being so abrupt, but it is my way and I can't help it. I want to tell you what I have been whispering to myself for many weeks—ever since I first met you, in fact. Only three words, yet they mean more to me than any other words in the language—I love you. I want you to be my wife. Do you understand me, Miss—Edna?"

Mr. Spencer, your avowal is a great surprise to me."

"I trust not an unpleasant one. I——"

Edna interrupted him.

"Of course I appreciate the honor you do me by making this proposal, but I wish to say that it is quite impossible that I ever can be your wife."

"Impossible!" he ejaculated, trying to hide his intense disappointment.

"Quite impossible, Mr. Spencer," she repeated, decidedly. "I hope——"

"No, no," he cried, earnestly. "I cannot take such an answer. I'll wait. I'll try to be patient. I'll give you time to think—to consider. I see I have been too hasty. I should have known that a woman likes to keep a man in suspense—when she's sure of him. A little later on you'll say 'Yes,' and make me the happiest man in Buffalo."

"Mr. Spencer, can't you understand that my answer now

is final? You say you love me? I believe you; but—I do not love you."

"Maybe not as you ought; but I can wait," he went on, eagerly. "It will all come in good time. I will not expect too much at first."

"Why do you persist? I have never given you any encouragement to think of me otherwise than as a friend."

"Friend!" he exclaimed, biting his lips. "I see you do not understand how you have grown each day stronger, and stronger about my nature, since the day I saw you first. Love you! Why, I worship you! I am jealous of every smile you bestow on others. I tell you I love you as no man loved a woman before."

"I am very sorry, Mr. Spencer——"

"Do you mean to say that you care for somebody else?" he demanded, suddenly grasping her by the wrist. "Is it true, then, that—that this boy, Jack Mason, has dared to aspire to you—no, no, I'll not believe he has had the impertinence to——"

"Mr. Spencer, release my hand, please!" cried Edna, rising indignantly.

"Not till you answer me," he said, rising also, and holding her firmly. "I will suffer no man, or boy, to come between us. I would kill him first!" he hissed.

"Are you out of your senses, sir? Let me go."

"I say you shall tell me," he continued, almost fiercely. "Do you care for him?"

"You have no right to ask such a question. Please release my hand," trying to free herself. "You are hurting me."

"I say I have a right, and I will know," he said, tensely, not noticing the entrance of the young cashier at that moment with a roll of money in his fingers. "I swear——"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Spencer," said Jack, quietly, stepping up to him, "aren't you forgetting yourself?"

The man and the boy eyed each other steadily for a moment, then the junior partner released Edna's wrist and said, in a threatening tone:

"I sha'n't forget you, young man, depend on it."

Jack took no notice of the remark, but held out the roll of bills.

"Here is the money you sent me to the bank for, sir," he said, politely.

Mr. Spencer took the bills and turned to his desk, while Jack and Edna left the room.

"I'm so glad you came, Jack—I mean——" the girl began impulsively when they were in the counting-room.

She was flushed and excited, and there were tears in her eyes.

"You mean Jack, don't you?" he asked, with a smile.

"Yes, yes, of course," in some confusion. "I'm so glad you——"

"Came. I know. I'm glad myself. No man, even if he is my employer, shall be rude to you in my presence," he said emphatically.

"You are very kind to say so," she replied softly.

"Kind! Nonsense! Did he hurt you? Your wrist is

all inflamed," he said, taking her hand gently in his. "What a pretty hand you have?"

"Oh!" she cried, drawing her hand away quickly.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Edna," he said confusedly, trying to take her hand again. "I haven't offended you, have I?"

"Oh, no," she answered, with a smile, permitting him to grasp her hand again.

"What was the trouble between you and Mr. Spencer?"

"Nothing," she replied hastily, with some embarrassment.

"Nothing! And yet I heard you ask him to release you—that he was hurting you—in a tone that brought me at once to your assistance. While he insisted that he had a right to know, and would know, something that you evidently objected to impart. Am I presuming in speaking to you thus? I hope not, for I would not offend you for all the world."

"No, no, you have not offended me, Jack. I know you mean all right, and I am very, very grateful to you for releasing me from that man's importunities."

"I could not stand by you and see anyone use you roughly, Edna. I beg your pardon, I have no right to be so familiar, but—I can't help it. You seem almost a sister to me. I wish you were, for I have nobody in all the world to care for me."

"Nobody?" in a low tone.

"I mean in that way. I am an orphan, you know, and have had to work my own way in the world unaided."

"And you have done so nobly, Jack—on your merits."

"Thank you for that encouragement, Miss Edna. I appreciate it more from your lips than from anyone else on earth. You have been very kind to me. I am not exactly your social equal—"

"What nonsense, Jack!" exclaimed Edna, with much animation. "I think more highly of you than any boy I have ever—"

She stopped in some confusion.

"Do you really?" he asked eagerly. "Do you really like me—that is, do you—what I mean is—"

"Now, Jack, you know I like you. You know—"

"Yes, I know you think something of me, but I wish—I wish that I was rich," he blurted out.

"Rich!" she exclaimed.

"Yes. Then maybe I'd stand a show of—of—winning you for my wife some day," he said, desperately.

"Oh, Jack!" she replied, looking down, but without taking her hand away.

"Do you think I'd stand a show, then?" he persisted, eagerly.

She did not answer.

"Is there any show for me, anyhow?" he went on, impetuously. "I do love you, Edna. I can't help telling you so, to save my life. If there isn't any chance for me I'll not bother you any more. I'll try to—to forget you, though I don't think that I ever can do that."

"I don't want you to forget me, Jack," she said, looking up with a shy smile.

"Don't you? Don't you really? Then you do care a little for me?"

"Yes, Jack, I do," she answered softly.

"And may I hope that some day—in the future, you know—you will learn to love me as I love you?"

"No, Jack."

"No!" he exclaimed, dropping her hand.

"No, you foolish boy, because—because I love you already with all my heart."

"Edna!"

He grabbed her unresistingly in his arms and pressed a kiss upon her lips.

At that moment Bart Foster and Mamie entered the room.

"Oh, lor!" exclaimed Bart, "let's sneak, Mamie."

The pretty stenographer burst into a rippling laugh, and Jack and Edna broke apart in the greatest confusion.

CHAPTER VI.

ARRESTED.

Mamie went to her desk and she and Bart turned their backs on Jack and Edna.

"It's my lunch hour," said Mason. "Will you accompany me to a restaurant, Edna?"

"If you wish me to," she repled, demurely.

"I shall be glad to have you go along," he said. Then, turning to Foster, who seemed to be greatly interested in Mamie, he said: "Break away, Bart. Mr. Spencer is in his room and may come out at any moment and catch you."

Bart took the hint and went to his desk as Jack and Edna left the building.

It was well he did so, for the junior partner came out a moment later with his hat on.

Foster glanced furtively at him, and thought he looked uncommonly ugly.

"I'm going to lunch, Foster," he growled. "While I'm away I want you to move my desk and pick up the Shipping Register that fell behind it."

"All right, sir. I'll do it right away," said Bart promptly, making a bee-line for the private office. "He looks mad enough to make things mighty unpleasant for the rest of the afternoon," muttered the lad as he grabbed the junior partner's desk and swung one end out from the wall. "I wish Mr. Fairchild would come back. He'd put the squeegee on Morris Abbott's underhand efforts to get me bounced. Gee! What a lot of dust there's back of this desk. It's a wonder the porter wouldn't clean it out once in a while," he added, as he picked up the Shipping Register. There's something else here, too. It's a package of papers. I suppose they slipped off Spencer's desk, too. I'll pick them up, anyway. If they're no good, he can fire them into the waste-paper basket. Maybe I'd better look at them first. He might roast me for laying worthless documents on his desk, and I don't want to give him another excuse for

—hello! What's this? Bills of lading—invoices—letters—memorandums—all about Spencer's schooner, the Neptune, which he sent out on his own hook just before he came into the firm, and which foundered somewhere in the lake between here and Toledo. He collected the insurance on her and the transaction is a thing of the past. I guess he doesn't want these any more. If he did he wouldn't have let them lie there all covered with dust. He'd have got me to fish them out same as the Shipping Register. I'll look over them by and by and see what kind of stuff he had aboard that vessel.

Bart shoved the package into his pocket and returned to his desk.

In a few minutes he ran against a snag in his work that only Jack could straighten out for him, and after glancing at the clock and calculating that Mason would be back shortly he decided to stop and satisfy his curiosity concerning the package of documents he had found behind the junior partner's desk.

So he took them out and started to overhaul them.

In a moment or two his features began to express the greatest astonishment.

"Great Scott! Am I awake or what? Forty cases of cotton and sawdust, marked X. Y. Z., shipped as real Valenciennes lace, value, \$15,000; thirty cases old books and newspapers, marked P. & Q., shipped as watered silks, value, \$10,000; eighteen cases old rags, marked—Gee! What does this all mean?" said Bart, much bewildered. "Maybe these letters will explain?"

The first letter was a scrawl, signed by Manuel Fernandez, accepting the offer of the command of the schooner Neptune.

The second was also from Fernandez, in which the Mexican stated he had secured a crew of men who, for a suitable inducement, could be depended on to keep dark about anything that might happen to the Neptune.

"What does that mean?" Bob asked himself. "Looks kind of suspicious, seems to me. What did this Fernandez expect was liable to happen to the schooner? And what were the two men expected to keep dark about?"

The third and last letter was a startler, and explained matters so that even Bart understood the whole scheme.

Fernandez said that the cargo was all aboard the schooner and that he was ready to sail as soon as Spencer sent him a certain stated sum of money. He said that Spencer could make his mind easy about the Neptune—she would founder somewhere between Cleveland and Toledo, and that no one would ever know that the cargo was not as stated on the regular invoices.

"Well," breathed Bart, "if that isn't the biggest skin I ever heard of. A regular swindle. A get-rich-quick-and-easy method of doing up the insurance companies. And Spencer is behind the racket. I s'pose that's how he got the funds to buy an interest in this business. I can hardly believe the evidence of my eyes. Why, with these documents in my possession I can cause him absolute ruin. How shall I act? I must show them to Jack first. He'll be able to

suggest a line of action. It looks as if I had Spencer where the hair is short. How could he have been so careless as to lose these papers behind his desk? It's evident that he didn't know they were there, or he never would have sent me to move his desk in order to recover that Shipping Register. I guess my job is safe enough now. Morris Abbott will have to stay out in the warehouse, where he belongs. That's one satisfaction. And there won't be any danger of Jack getting fired either, as I'll bet Spencer would like to serve him, only he's afraid to do it. This is the greatest discovery ever. I'd like to show these to Mamie, for she doesn't like the junior partner for sour apples, but I guess I'd better not display them till Jack has gone over them."

Bart returned the papers to his pocket and rubbed his hands gleefully.

At that moment Mr. Spencer returned.

"Where's Mason?" he asked angrily. "Hasn't he got back from his lunch yet?"

"No, sir," replied Bart.

"Send him into my room when he comes in."

"Yes, sir," chuckled Foster. "He won't talk like that after those papers have shown him up," he added, as the junior partner retired to his room.

A few minutes afterward Jack came in and was about to change his coat when Bart told him that Mr. Spencer wanted to see him at once.

"I guess he's going to give you a hauling over for staying out so long," added Foster.

Mason laughed and started for the private office.

Evidently he didn't seem to worry much about what the junior partner might have to say to him.

"Mason," said Mr. Spencer, "I'm going out, for I have an important engagement to keep. Now, I expect a collector to call here from the firm of Green & Patton, to whom I'm indebted for the sum of \$2,000. A personal account. I would have drawn a check to their order, but they 'phoned me that they would prefer the cash. Here is the money. Count it, please, and see that it is correct."

Jack did so and replied that it was right.

"All right. Now I'll place the money in this drawer and lock it. Here is the key. When the collector comes you can get it and pay him. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's all," said the junior partner, getting up and putting on his hat. "I don't expect to be back for a couple of hours."

Jack returned to his desk, changed his jacket, and started to work.

"Look here, Jack," said Bart, "I've something to show you."

"What is it?"

"It will simply knock you silly when I show——"

"Foster," said the voice of Mr. Spencer at that moment, "I want you to go up the street with me."

"All right, sir," said Bart, reaching for his hat. "I'll tell you about that matter when I get back," he whispered to Mason, as he passed him.

Mr. Spencer and Bart left the office together.

More than an hour passed and Bart did not return.

Quite a number of persons passed in and out on business with the firm, while Mamie continued to rattle away at her typewriter.

At length Morris Abbott came to the door and glanced in.

There were no callers in the room at the time.

He stepped back and made a signal to some one.

Presently a young man walked in with a quick, business-like step and stepped up to the window.

"I've a bill here against Mr. Spencer for \$2,000," he said to Jack.

"From Green & Patton?" asked the young cashier.

"That's right."

"Let me see it, please," replied Jack.

The caller presented it.

"All right. Receipt it and I'll get you the money," said Mason, going toward the private office, which he entered and proceeded to unlock the drawer of the desk.

The key didn't seem to work well for some reason, and Jack wondered what was the matter with it.

While he was thus engaged the collector, singular to relate, hastily left the office without his money.

A moment or two afterward Mr. Spencer entered the place, accompanied by a shrewd-looking man.

"You see, Mr. Sharpley," he was saying, "I have missed money from the private drawer of my desk on several occasions. I did not suspect this young Mason at all, for he stands high in Mr. Fairchild's confidence, and it seemed absurd to associate him with such petty robberies; but I put my nephew on the watch, and he has discovered enough to convince me that our cashier, instead of being the model, virtuous young man we supposed him to be, is neither more nor less than a common thief. My nephew has found out that he purchased a ticket this morning for a first-class passage on the steamer Lake Erie, of the Buffalo, Cleveland & Toledo line, which sails at half-past four. Why should he have done this unless he means to leave the town? As he hasn't notified us of his intention to go anywhere, it looks as if he's going to do it on the quiet."

"It certainly does not speak well for him," replied the man, who was a detective. "Where is he now?"

"At his desk, I suppose. Why, no, he isn't. I hope he hasn't given us the slip. And that reminds me. I left \$2,000 in the private drawer of my desk to pay a private account of mine, and as I was afraid the collector might call while I was out I left the key of the drawer with Mason, so that he could get the money if the man called for it."

"What! You did this in the face of your suspicions?" asked the detective, in surprise.

"I had not at that time been put in possession of the evidence against him. The moment my nephew convinced me of Mason's crookedness I hurried to the police station for a detective, and you were selected to accompany me. I fear now the boy has taken advantage of my confidence,

abstracted the money from the drawer, and absconded. His absence from his desk is suspicious at this hour of the day."

"Then you'd better look in your drawer at once and see whether the money is still there or not," advised the officer.

"You're right. Come on, sir," and the junior partner led the way toward his private office.

Throwing open the door they saw Jack, who had at last succeeded in opening the drawer, taking the bundle of money out of it.

"We've caught him in the act, thank goodness!" ejaculated Mr. Spencer. "Officer, do your duty!"

As Mason looked up in surprise the detective advanced and grasped him by the arm.

"You are my prisoner, young man," he said tersely.

"Your prisoner!" gasped Jack, in wonder. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you are under arrest."

"Under arrest! On what charge?"

"Grand larceny, I should think, as the amount of money you were in the act of stealing amounts, I understand, to \$2,000."

The detective deftly slipped a pair of handcuffs on Jack's wrists.

The boy was simply paralyzed.

CHAPTER VII.

THE UNMASKING OF THE JUNIOR PARTNER.

"What does this mean, Mr. Spencer?" asked Jack, utterly at a loss to understand what the terrible situation meant. "Why am I arrested?"

"It means, ungrateful young man, that you are caught at last," said the junior partner, with a malevolent smile at the success of his plot.

"But I don't understand. What am I caught at?"

"The detective has just told you—stealing the two thousand dollars from my private drawer."

"Why, you yourself gave me the key to that drawer and told me to take the money and pay Green & Patton's collector when he called," replied the partly dazed boy.

"That is quite true; but perhaps you'll explain why you are taking the money before he turns up?" said Mr. Spencer.

"Before he turns up! Why, he is outside now waiting for it."

"Oh, he is?" replied Mr. Spencer, with a sardonic smile.

"Yes, sir. You must have seen him when you came in. He presented his bill five minutes ago."

"He did, eh? Well, Mr. Sharpley is a witness that the room was perfectly empty when we came in. Am I not right, sir?"

"You certainly are, sir," answered the detective.

"You mean to say that there was not a sandy-featured young man standing by my window just now?"

"That's just what I do mean. Now, look here, Mason, I think this farce has gone far enough. I accuse you of

stealing various petty sums of money from that drawer at different times during the last three months."

"You make such an accusation against me, sir?" gasped the astounded lad.

"I do. I have proof of it."

"What proof? Why, sir, I have not been in this room at any time when you were out except the present occasion, when I am acting under your orders."

"I shall produce a witness who will swear that he has watched you."

"Who is your witness?" demanded Jack.

"I think, Mr. Spencer, that this argument here serves no purpose," interrupted the detective impatiently. "I presume I am to take this young fellow to the station and lock him up. It will be necessary for you to come along and make the charge in due form."

"I will go, much as I regret the unpleasant necessity," said the junior partner. "Fetch him outside. It will be necessary to obtain some proof of his intention to abscond with this and perhaps other moneys."

"Abscond!" exclaimed Jack, indignantly, as they walked into the counting-room. "It seems to me that you are making a great mistake in this thing, Mr. Spencer."

"It would be well for you, Mason, if I were; but I have positive information that you purchased a ticket this morning at the office of the Buffalo, Cleveland & Toledo Steamship Line."

"I did no such thing, sir."

"But you were seen to do so."

"How could any one see me do that when I have not been nearer their offices than this place?"

"You deny, then, that you purchased a ticket this morning for either Cleveland or Toledo?"

"I do."

"You will oblige me, officer, by searching him. According to my information he ought to have the ticket in his possession."

As the detective proceeded to obey the request Mr. Spencer was astounded to see Mr. Fairchild, followed by Edna and Bart Foster, enter the room.

"Why, Mr. Fairchild," exclaimed the junior partner, "this is a great and unexpected surprise."

He walked forward with outstretched hand to greet his business associate, but the senior partner drew back coldly.

"I have no doubt it is a great surprise, sir," he said, "but I think I have a greater one in store."

"I don't understand, sir," replied the discomfited Spencer.

"You will presently, as soon as you have explained the meaning of this scene. Why is that boy handcuffed and being subjected to a search? What has he done?"

"Oh, Jack! Jack! What is the matter?" asked Edna, in a tone of undisguised distress, as she walked to his side.

"It means, Edna, that I am charged by Mr. Spencer with theft."

"You a thief, Jack! Impossible! You are incapable

of such a thing. How dare Mr. Spencer accuse you?" she cried indignantly.

"I accuse him because I have abundant proof of his guilt," replied Spencer. "I repeat that Mason is a thief—for he has abused the confidence of his employers."

"I do not believe you, sir," interrupted Mr. Fairchild. "I have always found this boy perfectly honest; otherwise I had not raised him to the post of cashier."

"But, sir, the evidence against him seems to be conclusive."

"What evidence?"

"I have missed money from a certain drawer in my desk on several occasions. I set a watch in order to discover the guilty person. This afternoon I was informed by an eyewitness that Mason has been in the habit of visiting my office after I left for the day. This morning the boy was seen to purchase a ticket for either Cleveland or Toledo at the steamboat company's office——"

"Did you buy such a ticket, Jack?" interrupted Mr. Fairchild.

"No, sir. I just told Mr. Spencer that I was not near the company's offices at all," replied Mason, stoutly.

"Who told you that Mason bought a steamboat ticket this morning?" asked Mr. Fairchild sternly.

"I will produce my witness in good time, sir," replied Spencer. "The detective searched him at my request to see if he had the ticket on his person."

"I have not been able to find it," said the officer.

"There is his outdoor coat yonder, Mr. Sharpley. Search that."

"Oh, Jack, I am so sorry that you have been subjected to this disgraceful indignity!" said Edna, with tears in her eyes.

"Never mind, Edna, I'll come out all right. I am not guilty even a little bit."

"Of course you're not."

Then, to the astonishment of all, Mr. Spencer excepted, the detective came forward with Jack's coat in one hand and the steamboat ticket in the other.

"Here it is—a first-class passage to Toledo, sir," he said briskly.

"Are you convinced now, Mr. Fairchild, that your favorite clerk is guilty?" said the junior partner, triumphantly.

"No, sir, I am not. It looks to me as if some one has tried to ruin the boy for some purpose not apparent on the surface. Did you know that ticket was in your pocket, Jack?"

"No, sir. Its presence astonishes me."

"It is easy enough for you to deny it, but the evidence is against you," sneered Spencer.

"Mr. Spencer, will you send Bart Foster for Morris Abbott?" interposed Edna at this point, a sudden recollection asserting itself.

"Why, Miss Garrison?" asked the junior partner, uneasily.

"Because I wish you to," she replied, with some spirit.

"Foster, ask my nephew to step in here," directed Spencer.

In a moment or two Morris appeared.

"Uncle," said Edna, in some excitement, "I accuse that boy of putting that steamboat ticket in Jack's pocket."

"Miss Garrison!" exclaimed Spencer, turning pale. "On what grounds do you make such a ridiculous charge?"

"When I entered the office, shortly after twelve, there was no one in the counting-room but Morris Abbott, and he was fumbling around Jack's coat."

"I wasn't touchin' his coat," snarled Morris, his face going white.

"I saw you touch it. I was almost certain that you took something out of one of the pockets and put it into your own," said the girl.

"I didn't take nothin' out of his coat," blustered Morris.

"What made you jump, and look so frightened, when I spoke to you?"

"I didn't jump, and I wasn't frightened."

"Officer," said the senior partner of the firm at this point, "search that boy's pockets and see if he really did take something."

"I didn't take nothin'," snorted Morris, glancing around as if in search of an opening for escape.

"I object to my nephew being subjected to such an indignity," sputtered Spencer. "I guarantee his honesty."

"But you had no scruples about having Mason searched," replied Mr. Fairchild. "What's fair for one is fair for the other. I insist that the boy be searched."

Mr. Sharpley had no objection against obliging the senior partner, so he caught Morris by the arm and, putting his hand in the lad's outside pocket, withdrew Edna's photograph.

"This seems to be your picture, young lady," he said, holding it up.

"Why, of course. I gave that to Mr. Mason," she said.

"And I had it in the inside pocket of that coat," explained Jack. "How came this in your possession, Morris?"

"That must be what I saw him take out of your pocket," said Edna, eagerly.

"Did you put that steamboat ticket in Mason's pocket?" asked Mr. Fairchild of young Abbott, whom he had never seen until he entered the room, and was not aware that the boy was in the firm's employ.

"No, I didn't put it in his pocket," replied Morris, sulkily. "I don't know nothin' about it."

"Officer," said the senior partner, "I request you to remove those handcuffs from Mason's wrists and relieve him of arrest."

"But, sir——" began the detective.

"I will be responsible for my cashier," said the old gentleman, with dignity. "I am the head of this house, and I do not believe that Mason is guilty of any crime."

"All right, sir," replied the detective, unlocking the handcuffs and returning them to his pocket.

"I thank you, Mr. Fairchild, for this expression of your confidence," said Jack, gratefully.

"Tut, tut, my boy, I have known you too long to suspect you of robbing the house."

"I suppose you wish this matter hushed up, Mr. Fairchild," said Spencer, with a palpable sneer.

"Mr. Detective," said the senior partner, without noticing his associate's remark, "I now hand you a warrant to execute. You will observe that it's signed by Judge Daly."

Sharpley took the paper, glanced at it, put it into his pocket, and then turned to the junior partner.

"I regret, Mr. Spencer, but I shall have to arrest you."

"Arrest me!" gasped Spencer, aghast. "On what charge?"

"Conspiracy to defraud."

"What!"

"Did you ever see those papers before, Mr. Spencer?" asked Mr. Fairchild, showing him the documents that Bart Foster had found behind the junior partner's desk.

Spencer recognized the documents at a glance, and nearly collapsed.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ABDUCTION.

The junior partner saw ruin staring him in the face. His only chance lay in immediate flight, if he could get away.

That thought flashed like lightning through his mind as he stood for a moment, spellbound, gazing at the papers in Mr. Fairchild's hands.

Then summoning his energies, he broke away from those assembled in the room and sprang for the door.

The detective was after him in a moment, but Spencer, perceiving the man would surely overhaul him, suddenly stopped just outside the door and struck him full in the face with his clenched fist, knocking the officer down.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, he dashed up the street, disappeared around the corner, and succeeded in losing himself in the crowd.

In the meantime, Mr. Fairchild managed to intimidate Morris Abbott into making a full confession of the part he had played in the conspiracy.

The boy also admitted that the claim of Green & Patton was a fictitious one, the head bookkeeper of that firm, being a personal friend of Gideon Spencer's, having prepared the statement of indebtedness against the junior partner at his request, and the bill was presented by a young man paid by Spencer to carry out the part as arranged beforehand.

Mr. Fairchild congratulated Jack Mason on his lucky escape from the trap set to bring about his ruin.

He said that Bart Foster had accidentally run across him and Edna, and had shown him the papers he discovered that day behind Spencer's desk.

The contents of the documents confirmed the suspicions imparted to him by a communication from a Buffalo friend which had hastened his return north.

He therefore decided to proceed to his place of business at once, confront Mr. Spencer with the proofs of his iniquity, and demand his immediate retirement from the firm.

He took the precaution to secure a warrant for the junior partner's arrest, which he intended to use if necessary to force a settlement.

To find his trusted young cashier in trouble was the last thing he looked for.

He immediately suspected that Spencer was at the bottom of it, and acted accordingly.

After all explanations had been made, and the senior partner had attended to some pressing matters of business left unattended to by Spencer, he and his niece took their departure for home.

"You had a narrow squeak of it, Jack," said Bart, when they were left by themselves.

"I think so myself," admitted Mason. "Spencer had fixed matters so that but for the arrival of Mr. Fairchild I must have gone to jail."

"I'd have spoiled his little game, though, as soon as I heard of your fix, because I had those documents which incriminated him. I'd have taken them to a lawyer and had him get you out as quick as he could."

"I haven't any doubt but you'd have stood by me, Bart."

"Of course I would. I always will, old fellow."

"Thank you, Foster; I won't forget it."

"That's all right. You'd do as much for me if the chance was yours."

"I certainly would. Well, it's about time we closed up shop. It's five o'clock, and Mamie is putting on her hat."

The papers, next morning, had a full account of the exposure of the Neptune matter and the disappearance of Spencer, who seemed to have successfully eluded the police.

Mr. Fairchild had an interview with the Board of Underwriters, and agreed to turn over to them the amount that Spencer had paid for his interest in the business.

While this didn't fully cover the loss that the insurance companies had suffered through the fraud, it reimbursed them to a considerable extent, and they were glad to get it.

Although Mr. Fairchild did not discharge Morris Abbott, the chances looked good for him losing his job, as he had no chance now to cover up his mistakes and other delinquencies, and he wasn't the kind of boy who took any particular interest in his work.

However, he saved himself from being fired by throwing up his job at the end of the following week.

Jack saw Edna frequently, both at the office and at her uncle's home, and the attachment which had developed between them grew stronger every day.

The police failed to locate either Spencer or Manuel Fernandez, and the inference was that the two rascals had left for parts unknown.

About ten days after the crisis in Spencer's affairs Edna left her home to spend the afternoon and evening at the house of a particular friend.

It was arranged that Jack was to call there about eight o'clock, pass the evening, and then see her home.

At the appointed time Jack appeared, and he helped to make the evening pass in a lively and cheerful fashion.

It was close on to eleven o'clock when Mason and Miss Garrison left for the home of Mr. Fairchild, half a mile away.

A car took them within four blocks of their destination, and they proceeded to walk the balance of the way.

They were so absorbed in each other's society that they did not observe that they were being followed by two men.

They were nearing their block when a hack came driving up the street at a rapid clip.

On the seat beside the driver sat a boy who bore a strong resemblance to Morris Abbott; in fact, it was that young rascal.

As the vehicle passed the two men it eased up, and one of the men made a sign.

The hack drove ahead and stopped abruptly at the corner.

The two men then hastened their steps and came up with Jack and Edna as they started to cross the street.

Before the young people woke up to the fact that they were in the slightest danger the men seized them with a strangle grip that prevented them from uttering the slightest outcry, and bore them toward the vehicle, the door of which was held open by Morris, who had descended from his perch for that purpose.

On reaching the hack, Edna and Jack were lifted in, the door was shut after them and their captors, and the hack started for the lake front.

Edna had fainted by this time, but Mason was struggling for all he was worth to break away from the vise-like grip of the man who held him.

He was soon put out of business by the man who had relinquished the unconscious girl.

This individual drew a bottle from his pocket, saturated a handkerchief with its contents, and pressed it over the boy's nose and mouth.

Jack's struggles grew weaker and weaker, and finally ceased altogether.

"He's safe now, señor," said the voice of Fernandez the Mexican.

"Good," replied his companion, who was unquestionably Spencer. "Now I'll treat the girl to a small dose to insure her insensibility."

This was speedily accomplished while the hack hurried on.

The hack windows were lowered to let in the fresh air and permit the fumes of the insidious drug to evaporate.

"Matters have worked out all right," said Spencer, with a triumphant chuckle. "We'll have them aboard the sloop in a few minutes."

"Si, señor," replied the Mexican.

Fifteen minutes later the hack rolled on to a small, un-frequented wharf along the water front of Buffalo, and stopped.

Morris Abbott descended from the seat and opened the door.

"There's no one in sight," he said to Spencer.

"All right," replied his uncle, taking Edna Garrison in his arms and getting out of the hack. "Help Fernandez carry Mason aboard the vessel."

Morris grabbed the insensible Jack by the legs, an operation that seemed to afford him great pleasure.

Between him and the Mexican they got Mason aboard the little one-masted craft that lay alongside the wharf, and lowered him down on a pile of rags at the bottom of a small square hole in the bows that was penetrated by the heel of the short bowsprit.

Then Fernandez placed the scuttle over the hole and secured it with a spit that ran through a strong hasp.

While they were doing this the hack driver turned his horses and drove away.

Spencer had carried Edna into the small cabin at the stern of the boat and laid her upon the bunk that had been surrounded with a board partition, thus converting it into a very narrow stateroom.

Then he went on deck to assist his nephew and the Mexican to get the sloop under way.

This was soon accomplished under the direction of Fernandez, who was a good sailor, and thoroughly at home in any kind of a fore-and-aft craft.

The mainsail and a small jib were hoisted, and under the influence of a fair breeze the sloop headed out into the lake, her nose being pointed west by south.

"How long should it take us to reach Toledo?" asked Spencer of the Mexican, who stood by the tiller.

"About midnight to-morrow, if the wind holds fresh all the way," was the reply.

"From there we'll take the Maumee River to Fort Wayne, eh?"

"Si, senor."

"And from there the Little River to its junction with the Wabash."

The Mexican nodded.

"The Wabash will carry us into the Ohio, near Raleigh, Kentucky, and the Ohio into the Mississippi?"

"Si, senor."

"Then down the Mississippi to—but no matter. We will not count our chickens before they are hatched."

"Shall we carry the boy with us all the way, senor, or—" and the Mexican made a significant gesture toward the water.

"No, no! I am not as bad as that, Fernandez," replied Spencer, with a shudder. "The boy goes with us."

"As you please," replied the Mexican with a shrug of his shoulders. "You are what you call the doctor. We must keep our eyes liftin' or he may give us trouble."

"I guess he's safe enough while he's under hatches," replied Spencer. "He must have no chance to escape."

"Trust me for that, senor. He is not the first I have attended to. It will not pay him to cut up what you call

shines. I am too old a bird to be caught nappin'. He'd better not make me trouble, or I fix him."

"I will relieve you at, say, two o'clock, and stand watch till six. To-morrow you can instruct Morris so that he will be able to lend a hand at steering the craft."

"All right, senor; it shall be as you say."

"Follow me, Morris," said his uncle. "It is time that we turned in. You can use the forward bunk in the cabin."

They left the deck in charge of the Mexican, who, leaning negligently against the tiller, rolled a cigarette, and, having lit it, puffed it with apparent contentment.

CHAPTER IX.

A LIGHT ON THE SITUATION.

When Jack Mason recovered his senses it was broad daylight, and he was rather astonished to find himself a prisoner in such gloomy and contracted quarters.

The motion of his prison-house convinced him that he was in some vessel on the water, which, of course, must be Lake Erie.

He soon recollected all that had happened the preceding night, and his chief concern was naturally for Edna, of whose whereabouts or condition he had not the faintest idea.

Although he did not smoke, he made it a practice to carry a silver match-safe in his pocket, and he had found from experience that it was often a very handy thing to have a match to call on when he wanted to strike a light.

The first thing he did, therefore, was to extract a match from the box and light it.

The glare illuminated his narrow pen, and he saw that he was in the bows of a small craft.

"This is a pleasant situation, upon my word," he said to himself. "I wonder what it all means? Why should I be put aboard this vessel? And where is Edna? Is she aboard, too? Who are the persons responsible for this outrage?"

These were a few of the questions Jack put himself, questions that he could not possibly answer, for he had not penetrated the identity of the men who attacked and captured Miss Garrison and himself on the previous night.

Whatever kind of vessel it was he was on, she was driving through the water at a smart rate on a tolerably smooth sea.

He knew that it was now bright daylight, because a narrow, glistening ray of sunshine came in through a small knothole in the scuttle lid.

As far as he had been able to see by the temporary flash of the match, there was nothing in the hole in which he was imprisoned but himself and the pile of gunny sacks on which he lay.

While he was figuring on the situation, and wondering what was going to be the end of this adventure, he heard a step upon the deck above his head.

Then something rattled and the scuttle was thrown suddenly open.

The inflow of sunshine blinded him for the moment, and all he could make out was the shadow cast by some one bending down over the hole.

"Hello, young señor!" exclaimed a voice in a foreign key. "Ah! I see you are awake. You are hungry, is it not so? Here is your breakfast. You do not starve as yet. Be thankful it is settled you are to live."

The speaker lowered a shallow bucket containing some slices of bread and a jug of water into the hole, then slammed the lid on again and fastened it.

That voice seemed to have a familiar ring to the boy.

Where and when had he heard it before?

He taxed his memory for a while, but could not place it.

As his throat seemed parched, he seized the jug of water and drained nearly half of it, then he ate one slice of the bread.

It was meager diet for a healthy, growing boy, but being a prisoner, he had to put up with whatever came his way.

An hour passed away, during which he finished his supply of bread and water.

The dizziness and peculiar feeling in his head, which bothered him at first, had now passed away, and he felt like himself again.

Jack was not accustomed to lying around doing nothing, and this enforced inactivity bothered him not a little.

He struck another match and more closely examined his prison.

He found that it was partitioned off from the rest of the vessel by a plank bulkhead, and had evidently been used as a kind of storage place for ropes and various marine odds and ends.

On examining the bulkhead closely, he discovered that several of the boards had worked themselves loose at the bottom, and that a good kick would be sufficient to dislodge them altogether.

As Jack had no desire to remain in his contracted quarters any longer than he could make a change, he speedily kicked the planks loose and, pushing them aside, looked into the space beyond.

He could make out nothing but darkness in the hold.

He flashed another match at arm's length, and saw that there appeared to be nothing in the interior of the craft but a ballast of paving stones.

As the craft was only leaning gently to the leeward, Jack decided to pursue his investigations further.

So pushing himself through the dislodged planks, he began to pick his way over the ballast, striking a match occasionally to take further note of his surroundings and to see where he was going.

In this way he avoided contact with the heel of the single mast and reached the cabin bulkhead.

Investigating the wooden wall, he found a knothole, through which he peered.

He gave a start of astonishment at seeing Gideon Spencer

and Morris Abbott seated at a narrow, oblong table, conversing.

The sight of his two enemies explained in a measure the cause of his presence on board the sloop.

It was evident that Spencer had been hanging around Buffalo instead of fleeing elsewhere, and had successfully eluded the vigilance of the police.

He now knew that the man who had brought him his meager breakfast, and whose voice had seemed familiar, must be Fernandez, Spencer's Mexican accomplice.

He scarcely doubted but that Edna was a prisoner somewhere in the cabin, and the only possible place that afforded concealment there was the newly constructed bandbox of a stateroom directly aft, and as he saw that the rude door was secured by a padlock, he judged that she might be in there.

Listening attentively to the conversation between Spencer and his nephew, Jack obtained a very fair idea of the main rascal's purpose.

He discovered that the sloop was aiming for Toledo, where she would enter the Maumee River and proceed to Fort Wayne, in Indiana.

From that point the Little River would take them into the Wabash, which would enable them to reach the Mississippi via the Ohio.

"Then," went on Spencer, "we'll proceed down the Mississippi to the Delta, and thence across the Gulf of Mexico to the Rio Grande, which is the boundary line between Texas and Mexico, and up that river to Matamoras, as I outlined to you some days ago. Once on Mexican soil, Edna Garrison must either consent to an immediate marriage or remain a prisoner until she does consent to become Mrs. Gideon Spencer. As soon as she is my wife I will open negotiations with Mr. Fairchild to settle matters with the insurance companies so that all criminal proceedings against me may be squelched, and I can return with my wife to Buffalo."

"You're all right, uncle. I s'pose you'll get back into the firm again and give me a job in the countin'-room?" replied Morris.

"That's the end I have in view, for Miss Garrison's half interest in the business will give me as much to say about its conduct as Mr. Fairchild."

"What are you goin' to do with Jack Mason?"

"I'm going to use him as a lever for bringing Miss Garrison to terms."

"How will you?"

"I'm satisfied that she's really in love with the chap, and consequently would do a lot for his sake. Well, Fernandez will take charge of him, carry him off into the country somewhere, and hold him a prisoner, subject to my orders. I will make it plain to Miss Garrison that Mason is wholly in our power, and that unless she agrees to my terms Mason will never be heard from again."

"What will be done with him?"

"I can't say what Fernandez will do with him if it comes to the pinch, but you may be sure that unless Miss Garri-

son becomes my wife, and turns over the management of her interest in the shipping business to me, the boy will never step on American soil again."

At that moment Fernandez thrust his head into the cabin scuttle and called Morris on deck.

Spencer continued to smoke and ruminate over his plans, while Jack, still watching him, began to consider how he could put a spoke in the rascal's wheel.

CHAPTER X.

THE PICTURE THAT SPENCER DREW, AND ITS EFFECT ON EDNA AND JACK.

Having obtained a general idea of Spencer's plans, Jack felt that if he could make his escape from the sloop at Toledo he could notify the authorities there and have the vessel captured after she had entered the Maumee River.

Edna would thus be rescued, while Spencer, Fernandez, and Morris Abbott would be returned to Buffalo to stand trial for their offence.

"Of course, I can do nothing until this craft reaches Toledo," soliloquized Jack. "That is, nothing except try for some loophole that will, at the proper time, let me out of this hold. I'll have to work cautiously and not let it be found out that I've got out of my prison pen in the bow. If my enemies get on to the fact that I had even the liberty of the entire hold there might be something doing I shouldn't like. They might tie me hand and foot like a prize pig on the way to market. That would put a spoke in my wheel instead of my putting one in theirs. It is fortunate that I can easily detect the sound of steps on the deck, which will give me time to fly back to the bow before the scuttle is lifted, if I hustle. Hello! Spencer is going over to that padlocked door. Now I shall probably learn if Edna is on board."

If he had any doubts at all on the subject they were set at rest a few moments later, when Spencer led the girl into the cabin and motioned her to a chair.

She had evidently been weeping, for her face was wet with tears, and her manner showed great distress.

"Pray sit down, Miss Garrison," said Spencer, politely. "There is no occasion for you to feel alarmed. No harm will come to you."

"Why have you brought me aboard this vessel, and where are you taking me, Mr. Spencer?" she asked, in tremulous tones. "Surely your intentions are not friendly toward me, else you had not attacked me on the street last night and used me with a roughness that caused me to lose my senses."

"My dear Miss Garrison, you know my sentiments toward you. I am sorry I was obliged to handle you in the way I did, but I had no other course in face of the situation in which the discovery of those unfortunate papers placed me. I could not bear to leave Buffalo without you, for to make you my wife is the one object of my life. Yesterday I ventured to make you a proposal—"

"To which I gave you a decisive answer in the negative, hoping that the subject would never be renewed."

"I told you that I could not accept such an answer. I told you that I would give you time to consider—"

"Time would make no difference whatever in my answer."

"Miss Garrison, this is the refinement of cruelty. Have you no look of kindness—no word of sympathy for me?"

"Mr. Spencer, I am already pledged to another."

"To whom?"

"That is not a fair question for you to ask me."

"Answer but this: Is it young Mason?"

"Yes, it is Jack Mason," she replied, with a touch of spirit.

"And you love that boy?" he said, biting his lips.

"I do."

Her tone was decided, and left no doubt in Spencer's mind but that she was thoroughly in earnest.

"I am sorry," he said, after a pause. "I suspected such to be the case, and have made my plans accordingly."

"What do you mean?" Edna asked, frightened by Spencer's words and manner.

"Simply this. That Mason, as well as yourself, is in my power. His fate will depend entirely on you."

"On me?"

"Yes. You may as well make up your mind that you never will have the chance to marry him, not as long as I live. I have determined to win you for my wife."

"I never will be your wife—never" said Edna, defiantly.

"Never is a long day, Miss Garrison," replied Spencer, with a crafty smile. "I think you will change your mind if you care anything for Mason."

"I do not understand you," she said, with an undefined feeling of fear assailing her heart.

"You will in good time. When you are out of the jurisdiction of the United States then I will show you how utterly futile it is for you to oppose the dearest wish I have on earth."

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, turning pale.

"To Mexico."

"Mexico! Oh, heaven!" she gasped. "Can you be so cruel?"

"I regret the necessity, Miss Garrison, but I am only returning measure for measure. You yourself are treating me with the utmost cruelty by refusing to become my wife."

"How can I when I do not love you?"

"You must learn to do so."

"It is impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible in this world," he answered calmly. "Many a woman marries a man for whom she does not particularly care, and learns to love him afterward."

"I could not do that; besides—"

"I know what you are going to say. You are thinking of Mason's claim on your heart. You will have to forget him, so far as considering him for a husband."

"I never will do that. I love him dearly. I love him

with all my heart, and sooner than prove false to him I'd die willingly."

Her tones quivered with mingled love and defiance, and in her eyes there was the fire of resistance.

Spencer saw that this girl was not to be easily broken to harness, and he disguised his anger with difficulty.

As for Jack, he was taking in the scene through the knothole in the bulkhead; his heart beat fast at the loyalty of the girl he loved with all his nature, and he swore under his breath that he would go through fire and water to save her from the machinations of the rascally Spencer.

"You say you love him with all your heart?" sneered Spencer, in a tense tone. "Then, of course, you would be willing to make a great sacrifice for his sake?"

"What do you mean?"

"This. That a final refusal on your part to marry me will be equivalent to his death warrant. Either you become my wife, or he will die, as sure as the sun rises and sets each day. Now I hope you understand me."

"Heaven!" she exclaimed, in a voice of agony. "You cannot mean that?"

"I do mean it. I've sworn to win you, and I mean to keep my oath. Mason is nothing to me, while you are everything. It is now his life against your hand. The choice is yours."

"And would you murder him?" she asked, in a hushed tone.

"Murder is an ugly word, Miss Garrison," he replied, with a slight shudder. "No, I shall have no hand in his death. I shall merely turn Mason over to the tender mercy of my associate, Manuel Fernandez. It is not actually necessary to spill a person's blood to be rid of him forever. Down in Mexico there are mines where the peons work even as slaves. What think you would be Mason's fate if he were taken into one of those mines and chained hundreds of feet below the surface, where he never would again see the light of day? No blood of his would be shed. He would simply live on a prisoner until nature gave out. Would he not, to all intents and purposes, be dead to the world? Surely he would. The crime of murder would not be on my soul, for who can tell how many years he might live there and suffer? Perhaps until he became an old man, if he has an iron constitution. You have studied history, Miss Garrison. You have read of the prisoners of the Bastile in Paris. They lingered unnamed months in their solitary dungeons in the very heart of a great city, cut off from kith and kin by the letters de cachet of Louis XIV, and others in power. Perhaps you have also heard of the Prisoner of Chillon, who passed so many years in his island dungeon, below the waters of the lake of Geneva, that he wore a path in the stone flagging with his naked feet. Is it necessary for me to mention other examples—the Man with the Iron Mask, and so on—to convince you that a young and healthy boy like Mason would probably linger for years under such conditions, until his mind gave way beneath the strain and he became a driveling maniac? Think well, Miss Garrison, before you con-

sign your lover to such a fate. Remember it is you who will sentence him to it, not me. Refuse to marry me, and you will as surely sacrifice him as if you drove a knife into his heart."

Edna listened to his words with beating heart and starting eyes.

The rascal spoke in cool, calculating and convincing tones, with not a touch of cheap melodrama in his voice, and as he proceeded the girl's terror increased, and her heart almost ceased to beat at the picture he drew so vividly before her imagination.

When he ceased to speak she gasped for breath, swayed to and fro in her chair, and then, with a cry of despair, turned deathly white and fell forward on to the table in a dead faint.

Spencer regarded her with a grim smile of triumph.

Even Jack himself had listened to Spencer's words with a species of fascination that held him spellbound at the knothole.

It was a terrible picture of refined torture that the rascal drew with the art of an accomplished actor.

But when the boy heard Edna's cry of anguish, and saw her fall senseless on the table, his very soul quivered with rage against the man who could so heartlessly work upon her girlish sensibilities.

So furious was he that every consideration of his own position was cast to the winds.

His sole object was to get at Spencer and take satisfaction out of him.

The stout bulkhead seemed an effectual barrier against that purpose.

But Jack was too blind with anger to think that anything could stand between him and Spencer.

The cobblestones around him suggested a method for beating an opening to Edna's side.

Without realizing the danger and ultimate fruitlessness of such a proceeding, he drew back, seized one of the heavy stones, and hurled it with all his force against the barricade.

Crash!

The wood quivered and cracked.

Crash! Crash!

Two more stones in rapid succession struck the fractured board, and it went to pieces in the center.

Spencer started to his feet with a cry of consternation.

Crash!

Down went a second board, and through the aperture Jack burst like one of the Three Furies of legendary story.

He made straight for Spencer, with blood in his eye, and the man could not help uttering a cry of dismay.

"You scoundrel!" roared Jack, grasping him by the throat. "It shall be your life or mine right now!"

"Help!" roared Spencer, as he went down on the floor, with the infuriated boy on top. "Help! Fernandez! Morris! Help!"

"You cur!" cried Jack. "I'll choke your miserable life out of you if I die for it!"

Then Fernandez, attracted by the crashes and Spencer's cries, rushed down the ladder and stared in astonishment at the scene before his eyes.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE HOLD OF THE SLOOP.

He was not long in getting on to the situation, though he could not understand how it had come about.

The shivered bulkhead accounted for the crashing sounds he had heard on deck.

Then he saw their prisoner struggling with Spencer, and without wasting any time in considering how the boy had escaped from the forepeak, he sprang to the aid of his associate in villainy.

The Mexican was both strong and wiry, and having Mason at a disadvantage, he easily tore him away from the half-strangled Spencer, and held him, in spite of his struggles, while the chief villain recovered his faculties and his feet.

"So," said Spencer, caressing his neck, where Jack's fingers had left their impress, "you got out of your pen, did you? And you tried to murder me on top of it, you young villain? You're more dangerous than I had any idea of. You'll find that you've only jumped from the frying-pan into the fire."

"You're an infernal scoundrel, Gideon Spencer!" replied Jack. "I heard what you said to Edna Garrison. Look at the poor girl now. Aren't you proud of your work? And I once thought you a gentleman."

"So you heard me, did you?" sneered Spencer. "Then you know what lies before you if my plans miss fire. Listeners never hear any good of themselves, and you've had excellent proof of that fact."

"Crow all you want to, Mr. Spencer; there's many a slip between the cup and the lip. You're a long way from Mexico yet—a mighty long way. Take care that a prison, and not Mexico, may be the ultimate windup of your rascally schemes."

"I'll chance a prison, young man," replied Spencer. "However, I've no more time to waste on you. I shall take added precautions after this to secure your tractability. Where shall I find some tough line, Fernandez? It will be necessary to tie this frisky chap up. The heel of the mast in the hold will be a good place to lash him to, I'm thinking. Let us do it at once."

"You will find what will answer the purpose in the locker under yonder bunk, señor," replied the Mexican.

Spencer soon got enough to suit him, and then he proceeded to secure Jack's hands behind his back, while Fernandez held the boy.

Edna recovered her senses in time to see her boy lover led from the cabin through the broken bulkhead into the hold.

"Oh, Jack! Jack!" she cried out hysterically.

Spencer turned and regarded her with a satisfied smile. "No harm shall come to him yet, Miss Garrison. He is

safe until we reach Mexico; then it will be for you to decide whether he shall be entombed forever or not. Even if you should consign him to such a fate you could not escape me. I should in time find other means to bend you to my will. At least you would remain my prisoner until you capitulated. So you see that the easiest way will be the best for you, as well as for your dear Jack."

Edna made no reply, but after staring despairingly at the aperture through which the Mexican had forced her lover, she sank back on her chair and began weeping bitterly.

Fernandez tied Jack securely to the heel of the sloop's mast, and left him in the darkness to his own reflections.

We cannot say that the boy, in spite of the fact that he had altered his position very much for the worse, regretted his attack on Spencer.

He felt that he could not have acted otherwise under the circumstances.

He may have destroyed his own, as well as Edna's chances for escape, as he had figured on, but the provocation had been too great for him to accept tamely.

At any rate he had acted the part of a man, and that fact solaced him.

A sound of hammering came to his ears, as the Mexican repaired the bulkhead as well as he could.

Jack, however, had destroyed a part of its usefulness, and it was really only as strong now as its weakest section.

Several hours passed away, and then Spencer entered the hold with a revolver in his hand, followed by the Mexican with a tray containing some dinner for their prisoner.

They came by way of the fore-peak, after removing the two boards Mason had previously dislodged.

Fernandez carried a lantern slung on his arm.

"Now," said Spencer, "as it isn't my purpose to starve you, young man, we've brought you something to eat. We shall release you so you can eat, but I warn you not to make any effort to get away, for if you do, I shall certainly shoot you in the legs, which would not be a pleasant sensation for you, and would rather interfere with your future usefulness if Miss Garrison decides to accede to my wishes, and you, in consequence, regain your liberty."

Jack made no reply, and Fernandez, putting down the tray on the stones, unloosened the boy's bonds.

Mason was hungry enough by this time to accept the fare brought to him, which consisted of a piece of fried steak, a baked potato, some bread and butter and coffee.

The two men watched him while he ate, and when he was through the Mexican tied him up again.

An hour later Jack saw some one approaching with a lantern, and soon made out that it was Morris Abbott.

"I thought I'd come down and see how you were gettin' along, Jack Mason," he said, with one of his unpleasant grins.

"Come here to crow over me, I suppose," replied Jack, scornfully.

"I just wanted to see whether you was comfortable or not," chuckled Morris.

"Well, you see whether I am or not. How would you like to exchange places?"

"Nixy. I wouldn't be in your shoes for nothin'."

"And I'd rather be as I am than in your shoes, for it won't be long before you'll get all that's coming to you."

"Sure I will. There's money and a good job comin' to me when my uncle marries Edna Garrison."

"Yes, when he does," replied Jack, sarcastically.

"Oh, he's goin' to do it all right," answered Morris, nodding his head in quite a positive manner. "Don't you worry about that."

"I'm not worrying about it at all."

"I would if I was you, because if she don't give in when this sloop gets to Matamoras, you'll be done up in good shape. It's up to her whether you get free again or not."

"I'd rather never get free than see her marry such a rascal as your uncle."

"You talk mighty big now, but just wait till you get to Mexico, that's all."

"I hope I'll never get there. It's some distance from here to Mexico, and lots of things are liable to happen between this and next week."

"Nothin' 'll happen that'll help you any—nothin' unless the girl knuckles down to my uncle, and marries him right off the reel. If she does that you'll be let go; otherwise, nit."

"Look here, Morris, I think your room is better than your company. What's the matter with going back on deck?"

"I'm goin'. This is a beastly hole, but it's good enough for you, I guess."

Thus speaking, Morris turned around and retired by the way he came.

About dark Jack was released again to eat his supper, and then left for the night.

It was about four in the morning when the sloop entered the mouth of the Maumee River, sailed past Toledo, and passed on up the stream.

It was two in the afternoon when the sloop struck the Little River in the vicinity of Fort Wayne, and about half-past four when she entered the Wabash.

The Ohio was reached at midnight on the second day thereafter, and about the middle of the ensuing afternoon Cairo, at the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi, was sighted, and the sloop passed into the mighty Father of Waters on her way to the Gulf.

A week later the vessel sailed out into the Gulf of Mexico, with a straight run across that body of water of about 500 miles to the mouth of the Rio Grande.

During all this time Jack Mason was carefully looked after by both the Mexican and Spencer, for neither was taking any chances with him.

Their vigilance relaxed a bit after leaving the Delta of the Mississippi, for they now considered themselves clear of the United States.

Matamoras, their destination, was about forty miles up the Rio Grande, and they did not expect to meet with any difficulty in reaching that Mexican town, where Spencer hoped to be able to bring his scheme to a satisfactory climax.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BRAVERY OF EDNA GARRISON.

Edna Garrison, after she recovered from her first paroxysm of despair, seemed a changed girl.

Spencer was rather surprised and nonplussed by her deportment.

He expected a series of hysterics on her part, mingled with pleadings for herself and for Mason.

Nothing of the kind happened.

She locked herself in her little stateroom, which had been specially fitted up with every possible convenience for her accommodation, and refused to open the door except when Morris brought her meals.

She would hold no communication whatever with Spencer, and the Mexican did not bother her.

How she employed her time the king-pin rascal had no means of knowing, and after an ineffectual attempt to force another interview he ceased to trouble her, contented to believe that he had her fully in his power, and that it was only a question of a very short time when she would have to yield to his wishes or take the consequences that were also to extend to Jack Mason.

It would probably have surprised him if he had been able to penetrate her thoughts.

He would have found that from a weak and confiding girl she had suddenly developed into a desperate and very determined young woman.

The mental picture drawn by Spencer of her boy lover's probable fate had nerved her to attempt Jack's rescue at the first opportunity that presented itself.

She knew where and how he was confined in the hold, and through the long hours of each night she had watched for a chance to accomplish the purpose she had in her mind.

But while the sloop was sailing down the different rivers she found that the vigilance of the two rascals was maintained at the highest pitch, and that it was useless for her to attempt to interfere in Jack's behalf.

She did not lose her courage nor her hope, in spite of that fact.

She believed that her perseverance would yet be rewarded.

How to get into the hold, if a chance offered, was what most concerned her.

By adroit questioning, she learned from Morris that Spencer and the Mexican visited their prisoner by way of the fore-peak, which was covered by a hatch secured on the outside by a hasp.

As either Fernandez or Spencer stood watch at night

in turns at the helm, the chance of reaching the fore-peak unobserved was scarcely possible.

To attempt such a thing by day was absolutely out of the question.

She kept tab on their progress toward the Gulf by questioning Morris every day, and he wasn't clever enough to suspect that she had any particular motive in asking for this information.

At length the sloop, as we have stated, left the mouth of the Mississippi and steered across the great Gulf for her destination, the Rio Grande.

Edna ascertained that they expected to reach the river in two days if the wind was favorable.

It was favorable for a matter of forty hours, and the girl was beginning to despair of success, when at sundown of the second day the wind died down to a comparative calm, which promised soon to be a complete one.

When Fernandez came into the cabin at midnight to arouse Spencer to take his turn on deck, there wasn't a breath of wind stirring, the surface of the Gulf was glassy, and the schooner was drifting with the tide.

Spencer got up, yawned, and stumbled up the ladder to the deck.

The Mexican turned into Spencer's bunk, and soon his deep breathing announced that he was asleep.

Edna at that moment was the most wide awake person on board.

She knew that if the wind sprang up, the following forenoon would probably see the sloop in the Rio Grande.

If Jack was to be rescued, it must be done that night.

Half an hour after she had seen Spencer go on deck she left her room, and securing a sharp knife from the locker which served the purpose of a pantry, she softly climbed the upright ladder until her eyes reached the level of the deck, and then looked for Spencer at the helm.

Her heart gave a great throb of excitement and hope, for she saw her persecutor stretched out asleep on the deck near the steering apparatus.

Slipping back down the ladder, she secured the lantern which burned all night in the cabin, remounted the ladder, and stepped out on deck.

With the lightness of a fawn she ran forward to where the scuttle cover was secured above the entrance to the fore-peak.

The piece of iron that held the hasp in place was easily drawn, the cover raised, and down into the hole dropped the courageous girl.

Through the opening she passed into the hold, waving her lantern before her.

In a moment she stood before Jack, who was seated on a pile of gunny sacks provided for his accommodation, with his arms and chest bound tight to the mast.

He was asleep, dreaming, perchance, of old times in Buffalo.

"Dear, dear Jack!" she breathed, bending down and barely touching her lips to his forehead.

Then with a few slashes of the knife she cut him free.

Putting her hand over his mouth, she cried in his ear: "Jack! Jack! Wake up!"

In a moment his eyes were wide open, and he was staring into her face, partially illumined by the light of the lantern.

"Edna!"

"You here, my sweetheart! In this hold! What does it mean?" he cried, in a tone of astonishment.

"It means, Jack, that I have come to save you," she said, throwing her arms around his neck.

As she spoke he became conscious that his bonds no longer held him to the mast.

He struggled up and caught her in his arms.

"You came to save me, Edna! How did you manage it?"

"No matter how I did it, Jack; I dare not waste the time now to tell you, for every moment is precious to us. For two weeks I have been watching for this chance, and it has only come at the eleventh hour, for we are but a few hours' sail from the Rio Grande."

"A few hours' sail!" he exclaimed. "Then we are in the Gulf?"

"We are."

"And out of sight of land?"

"Yes, since yesterday morning."

"Yet the sloop seems quite stationary to me."

"We are becalmed. There is not a breath of air stirring."

"How, then, are we to leave this vessel?"

"Oh, Jack, I do not know! I did not think of that!" she cried, as she realized in its full sense their terrible predicament.

"Never mind, dear. Don't worry. But tell me how you managed to reach me without discovery. Are the men both asleep?"

"Yes. Fernandez is asleep in the cabin, and Mr. Spencer is, through a fortunate chance, asleep on deck near the wheel."

Jack considered the situation.

It was a ticklish one, and he hardly knew how to get around it.

"Where did you get the knife to cut my lashings?"

"From the locker where those articles are kept."

"Well, remain here till I take a glance at the deck," he said.

He left her and made his way into the fore-peak.

He had a half-formed scheme in his mind.

Spencer had a revolver.

If it was on his person now, and the man was still asleep, as Edna said he was, perhaps he could secure it.

With that in his possession, he believed he could, perhaps, stand the rascals off if it came to such a pinch.

Unfortunately for the success of this scheme, a sudden slant of wind struck the sloop just as he put his head out of the scuttle, and the heeling of the craft awoke Spencer. Jack saw him rise and grab the tiller.

"Blocked!" muttered the boy, dropping back out of sight. "What can we do now?"

The breeze continued to blow, and gradually became steady in the right quarter, the sloop slipping along at her former speed.

Jack could only return to Edna and report the unfortunate change in affairs.

Before leaving the fore-peak he took the precaution to softly close the scuttle cover.

"We are cornered, sweetheart, and must remain here. Your absence from your stateroom will probably not be found out before some time in the morning. When they bring me my breakfast they will discover that I am at liberty, and then I will have to try and stand them off as best I may."

"Oh, Jack! Jack!" was all the girl could say.

He endeavored to comfort and reassure her as the moments slipped away, and they stood in the darkness of the hold—for Jack had doused the lantern—clasped in each other's arms, hoping against hope that something would turn up to their advantage.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CHASE OF THE SLOOP.

The fact that Edna Garrison did not return to her home on the night of the abduction was not noted until next morning, and then her aunt and uncle supposed she had been persuaded to remain all night at her friend's house.

When she did not appear at a reasonable hour during the forenoon, Mrs. Fairchild sent a servant around to find out if anything was the matter with her.

The man returned with word that Edna, accompanied by Jack Mason, had left her friend's home for her own at about eleven o'clock.

This was rather startling news for the aunt, and she sent the servant at once to the shipping office to inform Mr. Fairchild of the fact.

Jack's unexplained absence from the office had, of course, been noticed by the shipping merchant, and he was wondering what could be the cause of it.

He was on the point of sending Bart around to Jack's lodgings when the servant appeared with the unlooked for news of Edna's non-appearance at her home.

The merchant was much disturbed, and started Bart out to see if he could get any intelligence about Mason.

Bart returned in an hour and reported that Jack had not been home all night, and nobody had seen him since he left the house the previous evening.

Mr. Fairchild could not understand the situation, and decided it was serious enough to call in the services of the police.

Two detectives were put on the case, and thus the day passed, without results.

When the next day slipped by without news from the missing ones, Mr. Fairchild was very seriously alarmed.

Bart Foster was also very much concerned over the disappearance of his chum.

What could have become of him and Edna?

Mr. Fairchild inserted a reward notice in the papers, payable for information about the absent boy and girl.

Toward the end of the week a tall, thin young man came into the office and asked to see Mr. Fairchild.

"He's out," replied Bart. "Can I do anything for you?"

"I've called about that advertisement of Mr. Fairchild's," said the visitor, in a hesitating way.

"Do you know anything about the whereabouts of Jack Mason and Edna Garrison?" asked Bart, in some excitement.

"Maybe I do, and maybe I don't," replied the caller, with a shrewd look.

"Well, if you can put us on their track, it will be \$500 in your pocket," said Bart eagerly.

The visitor licked his lips, as if he would like to earn that sum.

Just then the merchant came in.

"Mr. Fairchild," said Bart, "here is a person who has called about your advertisement."

"Step into my office," said the shipper, and the young man followed him in.

"My name is Clarence Hale," said the visitor, after seating himself. "I am a friend of Morris Abbott. I may as well admit that I am the person who presented that bogus bill from Green & Patton, and then made myself scarce. It was a put-up job on your cashier. I was to get \$25 for my part in the matter, but owing to the failure of the scheme the money was not paid me."

"Hum!" said Mr. Fairchild, impatiently. "What has this to do with my advertisement?"

"This. Before I state what I have to say I want you to assure me that I will not be prosecuted for that little matter."

"Very well. If your information is valuable, you shall not be troubled."

"And you will pay me the \$500 reward?"

"Assuredly, if you are entitled to it."

The visitor seemed to be satisfied, and proceeded.

He said that he and Morris had been very thick for some time past.

That it was to oblige Morris he had posed as the bill collector.

That the evening before the disappearance of Mason and Miss Garrison he and Morris had been together until midnight, and that both had drunk more strong waters than was good for them.

That on that occasion Morris had, when in a tipsy state, confided to him the fact that Spencer and Fernandez, whom the police supposed had skipped the city, were still hiding in Buffalo.

Further, Morris told him that Spencer had a splendid scheme for mending his tangled fortunes—nothing more nor less than the abduction of Edna Garrison, whom he proposed to carry off to the town of Matamoras, in Mexico, where Fernandez was well known, and from which place Spencer could safely open negotiations with Mr. Fairchild.

after he had compelled Miss Garrison to marry him as the price of her liberty.

The shipper was thunderstruck at this revelation.

"Why did you not come forward before with this information?" he asked Hale, in a severe tone.

"Because I did not take any stock in Abbott's story. He was more than half drunk when he told me about it. When I saw the account in the papers of the disappearance of Miss Garrison, as well as Mason, against whom I knew Spencer entertained a grudge, I began to think it was true, after all. I was afraid to come to you until I saw the offer of the reward, lest I might get into trouble over the matter."

"Well," said the merchant, "how did Spencer propose to carry off my niece, and what were his plans with respect to young Mason?"

"I can't tell you a thing about that. All I know is what I have mentioned to you."

"Very well, I will call a detective to hear your story," said Mr. Fairchild, drawing his desk 'phone toward him.

"You don't mean to have me arrested?" asked the young man, in alarm.

"No. Not if I find you have told me the exact truth."

"I have, upon my honor."

In fifteen minutes a cab brought a detective to the office.

He listened to Hale's story, questioned him closely, and then decided that he must be detained at headquarters pending an investigation.

Hale protested, to no purpose, and left the shipping house in company with the officer.

That afternoon the night owl hackmen were rounded up and put through the third degree at headquarters, with the result that the man who had been connected with the abduction of Mason and Edna was discovered, and made to confess.

He was put in a cell, and detectives were sent out to ascertain something about the sloop which had been moored at the unfrequented wharf.

She was gone, of course, but telegraph inquiries to Cleveland and Toledo developed the fact that a craft answering her description had been seen entering the Maumee River on the second morning after the abduction, bound west.

The authorities were now sure they were on the right track.

After an interview with Mr. Fairchild, it was decided that Bart Foster, owing to his familiarity with Spencer's personality, should accompany Detective Ketcham in his pursuit of the sloop.

They immediately took a Lake Shore train for Toledo.

The detective learned enough at Toledo to give him an inkling of the course the sloop must follow, and he and Bart went on by rail to Fort Wayne.

Here they learned that the sloop had entered the Little River after a Mexican had purchased some supplies for the craft.

Detective Ketcham and Bart went on to Huntington,

Indiana, where the Little River flows into the Wabash, and found that the sloop had been seen there just ten days since.

By this time the officer and his young ally had a pretty clear idea as to the course the vessel would have to take to reach Matamoras on the Rio Grande.

After tracking the sloop to Cairo, they took a train for New Orleans.

Here, persistent inquiry developed the fact that a craft answering to the black sloop had passed down toward the Delta the preceding afternoon.

"That settles it, Foster," said Detective Ketcham. "We must go on to Matamoras and head the vessel off."

They took the first train for Houston, in Texas, thence to Austin, where they changed to the railroad that carried them straight down to Laredo, a border town of Texas on the Rio Grande.

Here they hired a small craft to take them down the river to Matamoras, a distance of something over 200 miles as the stream ran.

In due time they arrived at their destination.

A close search of the water-front of the Mexican town showed that the black sloop had not yet arrived, so the detective decided to continue on down the river on their boat and meet their quarry either in the river, or when she came in from the Gulf.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE END OF THE CHASE AND A TRAGEDY.

When Spencer went below, at four o'clock in the morning, to call Fernandez to the helm, he was surprised to find the cabin in darkness.

"The lantern seems to have gone out," he muttered. "Well, it doesn't matter."

He woke the Mexican up, told him the lantern had gone out, and then took his place in the bunk, after removing his coat, vest, and shoes.

Fernandez did not bother with the lantern, which he supposed was still hanging in its place, but slipped up the ladder and took charge of the helm.

When the sun rose the mouth of the Rio Grande was in full view straight ahead.

At six o'clock Spencer came on deck and took the helm while the Mexican started to prepare breakfast.

The small cooking stove was in one corner of the cabin, and Fernandez soon had the fire going and the kettle on.

He laid the table for two, and then proceeded to fry a pan of bacon and eggs.

While thus engaged he noticed the disappearance of the lantern from its nail on the wall.

That struck him as a singular fact, so he ran up the ladder and asked Spencer what he had done with it.

"I didn't take it," replied Spencer. "If you remember, I told you that it was out at four o'clock this morning, when I called you."

"Well, señor, it is gone from its place. Some one must have taken it. Who think you that is?"

"How can I tell?" replied Spencer, impatiently.

The Mexican grunted, and went below.

He pushed the frying-pan back and looked at the door of Edna's stateroom.

Then he walked softly over and tried the handle of the door.

It yielded to his touch.

This was suspicious, so he opened the door and looked inside.

The girl was not there.

"Caramba! What shall this mean?" he exclaimed. "The girl is not in the cabin. Where, then? Ha! Some-thin' shall be wrong."

He sprang up the ladder and communicated the news to Spencer.

"What!" roared that rascal. "Miss Garrison not in her room? Take the helm and let me investigate."

He rushed down into the cabin.

In a few minutes he was back on deck.

"She is gone!" he cried, with a lowering brow. "She could not have jumped overboard."

"Hardly," replied the Mexican. "Had she come on deck, either you or me would have seen her, señor. It must be she who took the lantern. Why? To go into the hold, perhaps, to find the boy. Yet how shall she do that? Not through the bulkhead. It is impossible. The only way, then, is by the forepeak. She did not pass that way while I was on deck. Is it not a fact, señor, that you may have fallen asleep while on your watch, and she took ad-vantage of you?"

Spencer uttered an imprecation.

He remembered that he had been asleep during the spell of calm.

Without a word he walked forward and looked at the hasp of the scuttle cover.

He saw that the pin was out of it.

Then he understood where Edna was, and it made him furious to think how the girl had managed to outwit him.

"She's sharper than I dreamed of. Well, no matter. They are both down there together, but they cannot escape. They are trapped safe enough."

With a malevolent smile he knelt down and reinserted the pin in the hasp.

Then he returned to the Mexican.

"She is in the hold with Mason," he said. "No doubt but she has managed to free him long before this. What their plans are I care not. I have checkmated them. We'll let them dream of escape for a while, and then——"

"Señor, shall we do as I proposed some time since? You remember, I said there was an inlet about a mile up the Rio Grande. Would it not be safe to disembark our passengers at the head of the inlet instead of taking them to Matamoras? They will be quite safe in the hillside cave, while at Matamoras they could give us, perhaps, much trouble. The girl will be fully in your power, and if you

win her consent to the marriage I get soon a padre to do the business. Then you can take her with you to Matamoras and attend to your other business. As for the boy, it is for you to say what shall be done with him."

"Is the gang of which you were the captain still in the neighborhood?"

"Si, señor. They are expectin' that I return. If they have been lucky I shall perhaps remain with them."

"Then you can depend on their loyalty?"

"Si, señor."

"Very well. We will go up the inlet. Now get breakfast."

In half an hour the meal was ready, and Morris and his uncle sat down to it.

After they were through they went on deck, and Fernandez retired to the cabin to get his own breakfast.

No attention was paid to the prisoners, who were not disturbed.

By this time the sloop was entering the mouth of the Rio Grande.

The Mexican now took the wheel, and kept a sharp look-out for the inlet that opened out from the stream.

Finally he pointed it out to Spencer, and presently steered the sloop into it.

At that moment a small sailboat was seen coming down the river.

No attention was paid to her, and soon the sloop was well on her way up the inlet.

This narrow stream was a winding one, and the vessel proceeded slowly, for the wind was dropping and the trees sheltered her course.

At length, after a run of half a mile, she passed into a secluded basin, entirely surrounded by trees, and came to a stop when Fernandez and Spencer shoved her anchor overboard.

Then they lowered the mainsail and jib and let them lie as they fell.

The small boat which had been towing astern was pulled around to the starboard side, the Mexican boarded her, pulled to the shore, and disappeared among the trees.

He had scarcely vanished from the scene before the small sailboat that they had sighted coming down the Rio Grande, came into view and entered the basin.

It contained three persons—Detective Ketcham, Bart Foster, and a Mexican boatman.

They had spied the black sloop coming up the Rio Grande, and the detective guessed it was the craft they were in search of.

He was rather surprised to see her turn into the inlet, but nevertheless he ordered the boatman to follow her.

They did not sight the sloop again until they found her anchored in the basin at the head of the inlet.

Spencer had gone down into the cabin, leaving Morris sunning himself on deck.

That young scamp did not observe the approach of the sailboat, which had just sufficient way on her to send her up alongside the sloop, as his attention was attracted by

a number of gorgeous-looking birds among the trees on the port side of the vessel, while the sailboat was coming up on the starboard side.

The first inkling he had of trouble was when the detective, closely followed by Bart Foster, sprang aboard the sloop.

Then he turned and confronted the visitors.

He nearly had a fit when his eyes rested on Bart, the very last person he would have thought of meeting in that place.

With a shrill cry of warning to his uncle, he tried to evade Bart, who made a dash at him.

Foster pursued him to the bows, and then, as he could go no further, grabbed him.

"You young rascal!" cried Bart. "So we've got hold of you at last? It's the Buffalo jail for you just as soon as we can get you there."

Thus speaking he dragged the struggling boy aloft.

In the meantime the detective had dropped down into the cabin, where he came face to face with Spencer.

From the description he had received of the ex-junior partner he judged this was the man who had led him a chase of several thousand miles.

"You are Gideon Spencer, I believe," said the officer, sharply.

"Who are you, and what do you want aboard here?" demanded Spencer, scenting trouble.

"I am a Buffalo detective, and I have a warrant in my pocket for your arrest."

Spencer stepped back and put his hand to his hip pocket, while with a sarcastic laugh he said:

"This is Mexican soil and your warrant doesn't go here."

"Throw up your hands or I'll shoot," said the officer, sternly, aiming the revolver he had whipped out on the instant at Spencer.

The rascal sullenly obeyed.

"Where are your prisoners—Miss Garrison and young Mason?"

"None of your business," snarled Spencer, furious at the tables being turned on him.

Crash Crash!

Two cobblestones crashed through the weakened bulkhead, and Jack Mason's head appeared in the opening.

He and Edna, who for some hours had been the prey of the gravest apprehension as to their fate when they saw no chance of escaping from the hold, had been attracted by the loud and menacing words of the detective in the cabin.

They had rushed to the bulkhead to investigate, and heard enough to convince them that help from an unexpected quarter had arrived at the critical moment.

"Grab a stone, Edna, and help me smash in the bulkhead," he said to the girl, and the crash that rather startled the detective followed.

Instinctively the officer turned to face what he fancied might be a peril in his rear.

Spencer was quick to take advantage of this.

His right hand dropped to his hip, he pulled out his revolver, and with a hurried aim fired at the detective.

The officer clapped his left hand to his breast and staggered back, then, recovering himself with a mighty effort, he took deliberate aim at Spencer, who had started up the ladder, and fired.

With a cry Spencer threw up his hands and fell back on the cabin floor dead.

The detective then slowly sank back against a locker and with a faint sigh expired.

It had all happened so quickly before Jack's eyes that for the moment he stood spellbound half through the opening, with the affrighted face of Edna Garrison peering over his shoulder into the smoke-clouded cabin.

CHAPTER XV.

AT BAY.

"Oh, Jack," cried the girl, trembling with fear, "what has happened?"

"Spencer shot the officer sent from Buffalo to arrest him and rescue us, and in turn has been killed himself by the revolver of the dying man."

Edna turned white at this information and shuddered violently as Jack helped her through the opening into the cabin where she saw the dead men.

"Poor fellow," said Jack, bending over the officer. "He's past all help."

He disengaged the revolver from the dead officer's fingers and thrust it into his pocket.

Going to Spencer's body he secured his revolver and handed it to Edna.

At that moment Bart, attracted by the shots in the cabin, and still hanging on to Morris Abbott, stuck his head down the opening.

"What's the trouble, Mr. Ketcham?" he asked. "Why, Jack, is that you? And you, too, Miss Garrison?"

"Bart Foster!" exclaimed Mason, in joyful astonishment. "You here!"

"Sure I'm here. Come up. I can't come down, for I've got hold of that young villain, Morris."

Jack assisted Edna on deck, and quickly followed himself.

"Bart, old chum, I never was so glad to see you before in my life," cried Jack.

"Nor I you. Just help me secure this chap, will you?"

"That's what I will," said Mason, picking up a piece of rope from the deck and tying Abbott's hands behind his back.

"Anybody hurt in the cabin?" asked Bart, thinking that the detective had fired at Spencer or the Mexican, who, he thought, was also below, to intimidate them.

"Yes. The Buffalo officer and Spencer killed each other."

"What!" gasped Bart, while Morris turned white at the intelligence.

"It's the truth."

"And where is Fernandez?"

"I don't know. He's not below. I thought maybe he was a prisoner on deck."

"No. We haven't seen him."

"Where is he?" asked Jack of Morris.

"Find out," snarled the little rascal.

And they did find out right away, for at that moment Fernandez and several swarthy-looking companions came out from among the trees a few yards away.

"Caramba!" cried the Mexican, on perceiving the curious state of matters on the sloop's deck. "To the boat!"

"My gracious!" cried Jack. "There's Fernandez with three chaps at his back. Where's your boat, Bart? We must try to escape."

"It's alongside. Jump in and we'll be off."

While Bart helped Edna into the sailboat Jack fired his revolver at the Mexican, the bullet whistling by his ears, and causing the four rascals to seek the shelter of the shrubbery in short order, for they were not armed, and therefore not prepared for battle at that moment.

That gave the three young people time to enter the sailboat, Morris being abandoned as a useless encumbrance, and shoved away from the sloop.

The sail, however, was of no use now, as not a breath of the light air reached them in the basin.

"We'll never be able to get away at this rate," said Jack.

"Oh, lor', I'm afraid not," replied Bart, dolefully. "If those chaps had guns now, they'd be able to make us come ashore in short order."

"It's a good thing we've a couple of revolvers, with five shots left in each, or they'd be down on us with their boat before we could wink. Let Bart have the gun I gave you, Edna."

She handed it over to Foster while the boat slowly drifted toward the entrance of the basin.

The rascals were evidently following them behind the line of trees, but the drift of the boat was toward the other side of the narrow passage they were approaching.

Suddenly they saw the bunch of pursuers running ahead among the trees, as though aiming for some spot where they expected to be able to cut the boat off.

"It looks as if they'll get us," said Bart. "I'll bet they are going to do us up at a bend of the stream about a quarter of a mile down. It's very narrow there, I noticed, when we came up. Poor old Ketcham remarked that the sloop must have shaved both banks in passing. If they can find the trunk of a fallen tree anywhere, all they'll have to do is to throw it across that bend and then they'll have us in a trap for fair."

"Then what the dickens shall we do?" asked Jack, looking rather blank at his chum's words, as the last of the swarthy rascals disappeared through the foliage.

"I don't know," admitted Bart, in a tone of discouragement.

I think we'd better land here," suggested Edna, "and try to escape by running."

"If we do that we'll be at a great disadvantage on your

account, Edna," said Jack. "You wouldn't be able to keep up a quick pace long."

"I'll do the best I can, Jack, dear," she said, resolutely. "If we keep on we'll be caught anyway, according to Bart. Now that those men are out of sight we may be able to slip away from them somewhere and hide until we think it is safe to continue on."

Jack considered the question a moment or two, and then asked Foster what he thought of the plan.

"I guess it's the best thing we can do, Jack," he replied. "There seems to be a considerable wood around here. We ought to be able to stand a chance of giving Fernandez and his crowd the slip. If we go on I feel it in my bones that they'll have us dead to rights at the bend."

"Then we'll land and trust to luck. Speak to the boatman and see if he'll go with us."

The boatman refused to leave his craft, saying that he did not fear the Mexicans.

He promised to wait for them at the mouth of the river if he was not stopped on the way down the inlet.

Accordingly Jack, Bart and Edna stepped on to the bank and hurried away among the trees.

They soon found, however, that the wood was not so dense after they had gone a little way as they had anticipated to find it.

It gradually thinned out into an open country, which did not promise much in the way of shelter until Jack noticed a line of low hills near at hand that were covered with lots of projecting rocks.

He led the way in that direction, which carried them around the back of the wood in a semi-circle.

At length they struck the hills, and the boys kept their eyes open for some place that promised temporary security at least.

They had proceeded half a mile when, just as they reached a collection of rocks, the gang of Mexicans, led by Fernandez, burst out of the wood and came toward them.

The rascals saw them, uttered a triumphant shout, and started in hot pursuit.

"Gee!" cried Bart. "We're in for it now. We've got to hustle at a lively gait."

They rushed behind the rocks, but the boulders were of no advantage to them now.

Presently they struck a kind of defile and darted into it.

It led them in a circuitous way into the hills and finally right up to the mouth of a cavern.

"I'm afraid we're trapped," said Jack, "for to turn back means sure capture anyway. We've got to keep on. They're bound to follow, but in the darkness we may be able to shoot a couple or more of them down, and that would even up things."

Into the cavern they pushed, and were astonished to find that it showed signs of occupancy.

It looked as if they had entered the rascals' lair.

A couple of lanterns were burning against the rocky walls.

"There's a door yonder," cried Jack. "If we can get

in there maybe we'll be able to barricade ourselves against them."

"What good will that do?" asked Bart. "We'd be fairly trapped then. They could starve us into submission."

"Never mind. It will give us a breathing spell, at any rate. Come on."

They ran over to a heavy iron-bound door, with a barred opening at the top, which swung on ponderous hinges.

Jack pulled it open and they entered.

It was dark as pitch inside.

"I'll get one of those lanterns," said Bart.

He went back, snatched one from the wall, and carried it into the inner cave, the door of which they banged to, and then, to their dismay, they found there was no way of holding it shut.

"I'm afraid we're done for unless we can find something to push against this door," said Jack.

They looked around the small cave and were amazed at what they saw.

First there was a big chest, with its fractured cover thrown back, nearly full of golden vessels, plates, and other articles of considerable value.

Then there was an iron vessel, with a handle, full of gold coins, not far from the chest, while the floor in its vicinity was fairly littered with pieces of money, as if the rascals had been disturbed in the counting of the coin.

"Help me push that chest against the door," cried Jack, energetically. "Here, take my revolver, Edna."

They each seized an end of the chest, but it proved too heavy for them to move.

"Dump some of the stuff out Quick" exclaimed Jack, excitedly.

"Too late," replied Bart. "The rascals are in the outer cave and will be here in a moment."

"To the door, then," ejaculated Jack. "We'll have to hold it against them by sheer muscle. Kill the first scoundrel that tries to enter, Edna."

With a howl of exultation the gang outside rushed for the inner cave where they knew the fugitives must have taken refuge.

The situation became desperate when Fernandez, backed by his associates, partially forced the door.

"Caramba" cried the Mexican. "Open or we kill you!"

Jack and Bart tried to close the door, while Edna, with flashing eyes, stood ready to shoot.

CHAPTER XVI.

A WONDERFUL ESCAPE—CONCLUSION.

One of the villains had picked up a rifle in the outer cave, and it projected through the door at an angle above Fernandez's head.

Although Jack and Bart exerted all their strength to shut the door, the weight of the four rascals on the other side was slowly but surely overcoming them.

Edna saw that it was up to her to do something, so she

courageously walked up to the door and, thrusting one of the revolvers into Fernandez's face, cried:

Draw back or I'll shoot!"

The Mexican saw that she meant business, and with a fierce imprecation he drew back, and the two boys shoved the door against the barrel of the rifle.

Edna thrust the revolver through the crack and fired at random.

There was a shriek of agony from one of the attacking party, followed by a string of imprecations, and the rifle fell to the floor.

The pressure on the door was removed from the other side, and the cowardly villains retreated.

Edna reached down, seized the barrel of the rifle, and drew the gun into the cave, while the two boys slammed the door to.

They knew that it was but a temporary respite, but were determined to make the most of it.

"Edna," said Jack, "you and Bart tumble out that treasure stuff so we can move the chest."

The two hurriedly obeyed Jack's order, and when half the stuff was out on the floor Jack and Bart were able to drag the box against the door.

They then returned the plates and vessels to the chest again, and retired to a dark corner to await further developments.

Nothing happened for a while, and all sound in the outer room ceased except the groans and maledictions of the wounded man, who had been removed from where he fell to another part of the cave.

"I wonder what they're doing now?" asked Bart.

"Hush! I think I hear them outside."

A sudden rush was made against the door and some heavy object struck it a resounding blow.

The big chest, however, held it firm, and it only quivered under the shock.

The rascals were evidently surprised, and the three young people could hear them jabbering away at a great rate.

A second attack was made on the door, followed by a third and fourth, but with no productive result.

Then the villains retired to consult; at least that is what the fugitives conjectured.

At length they heard a kind of triumphant ring to their tones, as though the scamps had found a way to solve the difficulty.

"What are they up to now?" said Bart.

"Looks as if they were figuring on getting us at last," replied Jack. "Give me one of the revolvers, Edna. You take the other, Bart. We'll sell our lives dearly if it comes to such a pinch."

"Oh, Jack; dear, dear Jack!" cried the girl, throwing her arms around her lover.

Something outside was rolled against the door, and the fugitives were wondering what it was when, without the slightest warning, a tremendous explosion shook the caverns.

The heavy door was wrenched from its hinges and fell in

over the chest, and the inner cave was filled with the suffocating fumes of burned powder.

Through this dense pall nothing could be seen but the dim light of the lantern.

"My gracious!" cried Jack, when he and his two companions had recovered from the first effects of the terrible shock. "They've blown the door in. Shoot now for your life, Bart."

The two boys awaited the rush of their enemies, but it came not.

For half an hour the young people did not dare to move, then Jack, after remarking upon the curious state of affairs, crawled forward and looked out into the outer cave.

There was nobody in sight.

"Strange," he muttered. "Where could they have gone? Are they waiting for us to come out? Or what is their object in holding off?"

As his eyes wandered around the cave he began to notice grawsome objects scattered about.

At first he could not understand what they were, but it was not long before he identified a human leg, then the mangled trunk of a man, then a headless corpse, then—

The truth dawned upon him with startling suddenness.

The powder keg the rascals had pushed against the door had evidently exploded prematurely from some cause, and the whole gang had been blown to death.

"Hurrah! We're safe," he exclaimed jubilantly.

"What do you mean?"

Then Jack explained, and Bart and Edna received the information in great astonishment.

They walked outside and saw evidences of the awful truth on every side.

"Served them right," commented Bart, but Edna only shuddered.

"And what about all this money and valuable stuff?" asked Jack. "This is all ours now. What a haul! Why, it will make the three of us independently rich."

"Hurrah!" cried Bart, intensely excited over his chum's words. "But how shall we get it away from this spot back to Buffalo?" he added, a moment later, with a very doubtful expression.

"How? By the sloop, of course. The vessel belongs to us now, since there is no one else to claim her. We'll stow the stuff aboard of her and sail back to the Mississippi, and thence to Buffalo, by the way Spencer sailed her hence."

It was so decided, and the first thing they did was to load Edna with as much gold plate from the chest as she could carry, while Jack and Bart took charge of the pot of money between them.

Thus loaded down they returned to the basin and boarded the sloop in the rowboat which Fernandez had brought ashore, where they found Morris tied as they had left him.

Their next work was to remove the bodies of the detective and Spencer from the cabin to the shore, where they left them until they had got every article of value from the cave to the sloop.

By that time Edna had prepared dinner.

Jack then made a proposal to Morris, and that lad accepted it, one of the conditions being that he was to sleep in the fore-peak.

During the afternoon the wind came up.

All hands went ashore and buried Gideon Spencer and Detective Ketcham side by side in the wood.

The anchor was then hauled up by means of a winch, the sails hoisted and the sloop slowly passed out of the basin and down the inlet to the Rio Grande.

Inside of forty-eight hours they came in sight of the coast of Louisiana and duly reached New Orleans without mishaps.

Here they took supplies aboard and then headed up the river, after Jack had sent a long telegraph dispatch to Mr. Fairchild.

Two weeks later the black sloop was moored to one of the wharves controlled by the firm of Fairchild & Garrison, and Edna was restored to home and friends.

Needless to say, there was great rejoicing in the Fairchild home.

Jack and Bart boxed all their treasure themselves and had it removed to the warehouse, where it was subsequently appraised at a value of \$300,000.

Bart, therefore, came into a cool \$100,000 as his share.

Jack acted generously with Morris Abbott.

He not only kept his promise not to prosecute him, but he placed \$10,000 to his credit in a bank as a trust fund he was to get with interest when he reached twenty-one.

Jack purchased a third interest in the firm of Fairchild & Garrison, and in due time married Edna, thus practically coming into control of the business; but he has no intention of advancing such a claim as long as Mr. Fairchild remains as the head of the house.

It has been arranged that Bart is to buy out Mr. Fairchild shortly, and then the three important characters of this story will be equal partners in the most successful shipping business in Buffalo.

There is no doubt in the minds of all who know Jack Mason intimately that he has proved himself to be one of the Smartest Boys Alive, and has achieved his success in life wholly ON HIS MERITS.

THE END.

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